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OF
BRITISH AUTHORS.

VOL. 770.

GEORGE GEITH OF FEN COURT BY F. G. TRAFFORD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

COLLECTION

BRITISH AUTHORS.

VOL. 150.

GEORGE GILPIN OF FRY COURT BY R. G. THAKFORD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

GEORGE GEITH

OF

FEN COURT.

A NOVEL.

BY

F. G. TRAFFORD.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

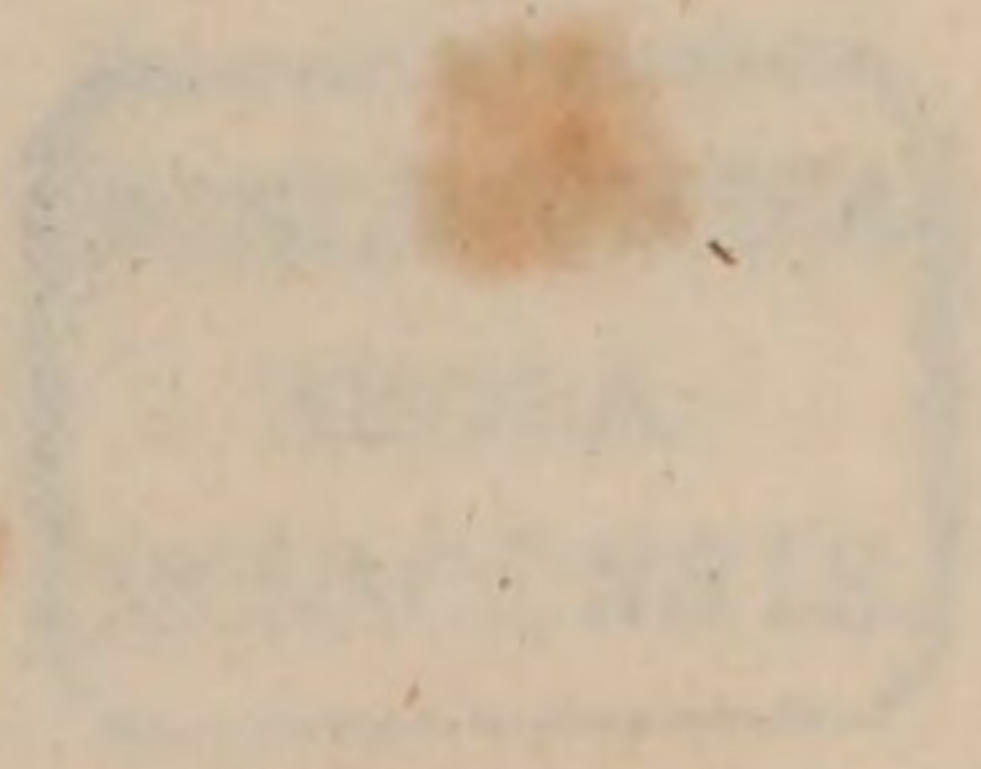
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1865.

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TO

ALEXANDER JOHN, ESQ.

OF

AGENTS AND, GARRICKS

IN THE REPLY OF HIS ADDRESS

ON GENERAL PRINCIPLES, AND OF THE STATE OF THE

THIS BOOK

IS PRESENTED BY HIS OLD FRIEND

THE AUTHOR

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GEORGE GEITH OF FEN COURT.

CHAPTER I.

Introductory.

QUITE close to Fenchurch Street — within a few yards of that noisy and crowded thoroughfare — there lies hidden away as quiet and forsaken-looking a spot as the heart of man need desire to see.

It is called Fen Court, and I should like to take my readers thither. We have paced the City pavements together before now, and I am glad to be threading the familiar streets and alleys in good company again.

A narrow covered passage affords ingress to Fen Court, which is but a portion of the graveyard once attached to St. Gabriel, one of the many churches destroyed by the Great Fire of 1666, and never rebuilt. The parish was subsequently united to that of St. Margaret Pattens, and this little piece of ground is all that now remains to tell us of a church past which flowed the clear waters of Langbourne.

It is beside the bones of those who peopled London in those days that we are standing. Shall we sit down for a moment on the churchyard wall, and leaning back against the iron railings, think of the City they knew before commencing this common-place story of modern men and modern doings?

Not a stone's throw from us stand the lordly Priory of the Holy Trinity; not far from thence the House of the Crossed Friars; close by that the Abbey of the Nuns of St. Clare, while beyond the Minories stretched away those fields which Stowe traversed in after days; and, beyond the fields, Ratcliffe swamps.

Returning through one of the posterns of Aldgate, we arrive again at the Priory of the Holy Trinity and find ourselves at once in an aristocratic quarter.

Here resided Sir Thomas Audley, who, dying in 1544, was succeeded by his son-in-law the Duke of Norfolk, from whom "Duke's Place." That narrow alley which now conducts from Fenchurch Street into Crutched Friars took its name from Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, who had his mansion hard by in the reign of Henry VI.; and whilst monks and nuns, and lords and ladies, were settling themselves down at this — which was then about the extremest eastern point of the City — all the road from St. Catherine Coleman, where Langbourne took its rise, was little better than a swamp, to say nothing of the fens and marshes out by Aldgate, and Moorgate, and Finsbury, which occupied the place of the lake that once washed the City walls.

It is not easy to believe in these things now. Thinking of the City as we think of it at the present day, it seems almost incredible that three hundred years since, letters for his Grace the Archbishop of York were forwarded to Tower Hill; whilst but half that period has elapsed since a Countess of Devonshire lived in Devonshire Square, Bishopsgate — not in solitude, but surrounded by much gay company — the last lady of rank who clung to the City.

There is no need to look scornful about the matter, most beautiful matron, though you may read this book in a house in Belgravia — for though the City be unfashionable now, no man may ever blot its ancient glory, or its present power, and strength, out of the page of history. Not all Pickford's waggons can destroy its romance — not all the ninth of November mummary can efface the recollection of those days when City pageants were symbols of a real power — not all the feet that tramp across Tower Hill can obliterate the mournful histories written on its dust; churches and graveyards, mean courts and narrow alleys, thronged streets and quiet lanes; there is not one of these but repeats its old world tale, of misery and joy, in the ear of the attentive listener. In the dim summer twilight we tread softly through the deserted thoroughfares, feeling that the ground whereon we stand is hallowed — by human suffering — by human courage — by valour and by woe!

But, after all, it is around the City churches that the most interesting memories of olden time cluster.

What story is there that the old walls will not repeat at our bidding? From St. Paul's down, each has its own monuments, its own records — its own separate portion of the narrative of ancient days. Close by where we are now sitting, are some of these old churches, and, from one and another, the soft evening breeze brings whispers of the greatness and the sorrow they contain.

Underneath the high altar of All-Hallows, Barking, lies, crumbling to dust, a heart which knew no such repose in life.* In the same church, sleep Surrey the

* Richard Cœur de Lion.

poet, and Bishops Laud and Fisher, who were executed on the adjacent Tower Hill; whilst a little to the north, stands St. Katharine Cree, where, in (for him) more prosperous days, Laud and his fat chaplains laid themselves open to the sarcasm of Prynne, whose description of the consecration of that church will be remembered so long as the history of ancient London has any charms for readers. Near to St. Katharine Cree we find St. Andrew Undershaft, which brings with its name thoughts of Spring and May, and garlands and festivity, as well as sadder memories of the great City historian, who, at eighty years of age, begged his bread by royal licence, and whose bones were moved from under his own monument to make way for those of a richer comer.

Close by there is another All-Hallows, besides Barking, where the Princess Elizabeth flew to give thanks for her release from the Tower — attracted thither, so runs the pleasant story, by the joyful ringing of its bells.

Almost within a stone's throw, what a number of churches there are! — St. Mary-at-Hill, St. Dunstan's in the East, St. Margaret Pattens, St. Catherine Coleman, Aldgate, St. Benet, and St. Dionsis Backchurch; whilst just beyond the wicket gate stood St. Gabriel, in the almost forgotten graveyard of which we sit.

Were all the City houses — all the long lines of streets, all the closely-packed warehouses, all the overflowing shops — swept away, the City churches would still form a town of themselves.

Dreaming here, we cannot but marvel what this place was like when both houses and churches were

destroyed — when London was one broad sheet of flame, and its inhabitants were camped out in the open fields, looking at the ruin which was being wrought.

Do you not wonder what the congregations were thinking about on that Sunday morning when the conflagration began? How many were making up their minds about the removal of their worldly goods — how many thinking of the great and terrible day of the Lord — how many shivering with fear — thought, to quote the Rev. T. Vincent, that into those churches which were in flames, “God himself had come down to preach in them as He did in mount Sinai, when the mount burst into fire.”

Doubtless some of those who sleep inside the rusty railings against which we lean, beheld these things — saw the City depopulated by plague, and purified by fire — followed the dead carts — looked down into the pits — hurried from the conflagration — witnessed executions on Tower Hill — attended the theatricals in the churchyard of St. Katharine Cree — and followed royalty, when kings and queens rode in state through the streets.

The very stones in this part of London talk to us eloquently of the past. Under the houses spring the arches of almost forgotten churches — in dim aisles stand stately monuments — in narrow lanes, mansions, once occupied by the nobility. The dust of great and good, and notorious and suffering men, has mingled long ago with the earth on which we tread, and there is scarcely an inch of ground but has some story or tradition connected with it.

If ghosts could return to their former haunts

what a congress should we behold in these old world streets!

Think of Tower Hill! What a regiment of headless men and women would draw up there, and march to Westminster, to meet the spirits of their oppressors! Think if the vaults were unsealed, and the graves opened, and the wrong, and the sin, and the cruelty, and the misery of the past suffered to escape into the night, what a ghastly procession would meet us at every turning!

And, as it is, the ghosts we encounter in fancy, while threading the older parts of London, set us reflecting about the bodies we shall see at the Day of Judgment.

Giving the imagination leave but to peep into the City churchyards — letting it have only a glimpse of that horrid foundation on which Windmill Street and the adjacent thoroughfares stand — suffering it to think of the graves lying deep under the City houses — it is not so difficult to realize what that mighty gathering will be like when the dead, small and great, shall stand before God, and be judged according to their works.

Fen Court is just the place for such pictures to be perfected. We are seated in the past with its dead, while up the passage comes to us the muffled roar, of the life, and traffic of the present.

We are not looking from the present into the past, we are for the moment existing in the years gone by. It is the din of our day which is the dream, and the memories of the olden time that are the reality.

There is not a sound to dispel the charm — not a footfall to break the silence. The murmur of the

human tide, ebbing and flowing through Fenchurch Street, disturbs the illusion no more than if it were the thunder of the sea. The few offices in Fen Court are closed. The children who come here to play have been in bed this half-hour — the sparrows have chirped themselves to sleep on the branches overhead. There is a great virtue of stillness stealing down many a lane, and into many a court and alley, for it is now getting dusk in the City, and the summer twilight brings silence on its quiet wings.

Unless you know the City well — know it, I mean, in all its moods and tenses — this statement may well surprise you, for there is a general impression abroad, that London is never quiet, except it may be from two to three o'clock A.M., when, a comparatively recent writer states, that "Riot, Profligacy, Want and Misery, have retired, and Labour is scarcely risen."

Nevertheless, I repeat my assertion, for the great stillness which seems suddenly to fall on the City with the summer semi-darkness, has always appeared to me little short of marvellous.

In the winter it is different. Life hurries along the pavements at a quicker rate under the gaslamps than under the dull November sky; the traffic of the day, increased if anything, rolls through the muddy streets; there is no end to the women one meets going shopping; across the bridges people pour ceaselessly; omnibuses are crowded; cab horses are whipped into that three-foot gallop which proclaims the last stage of weariness; St. Paul's Churchyard is thronged with ladies to whom the goods displayed in the shop windows offer attractions impossible to withstand; behind the counters,

pale young men strive with seductive smiles and graceful arrangements of ribbons and dresses to bring undecided customers to a decision, whilst in the back streets girls pour out of work-rooms and fill up the narrow sidepaths, with groups of slight, delicate-looking, thinly clad, giggling chatterers.

The winter evening brings with its darkness turmoil and unrest, but the summer twilight falls softly on silent lanes and empty thoroughfares.

The offices are closed, the shopkeepers have put up their shutters, the human passions, fears, hopes, joys and sorrows, that seethed along the pavement during the day, have been carried by their possessors miles distant, to the far off seashore, to the pleasant Surrey hills, or the green Hertfordshire fields.

The housekeepers, and the City police are left in possession of the City houses, and the City streets, and very gently, night steals on, and silence with it.

Where we sit, it is almost dark already, for the houses and the trees make a shade in Fen Court even at mid-day. Out in the open country or in the nearer suburbs, it is probably light enough still; but here, on this August evening, it is quite dark, and an increasing feeling of solemnity creeps over us as we sit by the graves in the gloom, whilst the evening breeze stirs softly and mournfully the leaves above our heads.

CHAPTER II.

Grant and Co.

FEN COURT is far from cheerful now, and except that it was fifteen years younger — which fact could not have made any material difference in its appearance — I do not know that it looked any brighter when George Geith tenanted the second floor of the house which stands next but one to the old gateway, on the Fenchurch Street side, and transacted business there, trading under the firm of “Grant and Co., accountants.”

If quietness were what he wanted, he had it. Except in the summer evenings, when the children of the Fenchurch Street housekeepers brought their marbles through the passage, and fought over them on the pavement in front of the office doors, there was little noise of life in the old churchyard. The sparrows in the trees, or the footfall of some one entering or quitting the Court alone disturbed the silence. The roar of Fenchurch Street on the one side, and of Leadenhall Street on the other, sounded in Fen Court but as a distant murmur; and to a man whose life was spent among figures, and who wanted to devote his undivided attention to his work, this silence was a blessing not to be properly estimated save by those who have passed through that maddening ordeal, which precedes being able to abstract the mind from external influences, and to keep it steady to one object, in spite alike of the rattle of a fire engine and the thunder of a railway van.

For the historical recollections associated with the locality he had chosen, George Geith did not care a rush.

It was the London of to-day in which he lived and moved and had his being. The London of old was as a sealed book unto him; and if any one had opened its pages for his benefit, he would not have read a line of the ancient story.

Passing every day by places famous in former times, he never paused to inquire, how and when and why they ceased to be of note. In the present he thought of nothing, cared for nothing, save his business; and for the rest, his dreams, when he had any, were of the future, not of the past.

What the past held of his — what of struggle, sorrow, resolve, grief, fear — no one was ever likely to learn from George Geith. The people with whom he talked most, did not know whence he had come, what he had been, whither he was bound.

Never a vessel hoisted fewer signals than the accountant. When other men hung out all their poor rags of colours, when they spread the stories of their lives out for public inspection, this auditor remained obstinately mute. Not a word had he to say about home, or friends, or relatives. He made no pretension to having seen better days — to having ever been anything different from what the world then saw him — a struggling man, who worked from early in the morning till late at night, and who seemed to have no thought nor care for anything, save making of money and extending his connection.

He lived with his work, slept in his back office, ate his breakfast while he read his letters, and swallowed his tea, surrounded on all sides by books and balance-sheets, and labyrinths and mazes of figures.

As for his dinner, at whatever hour in the day he

could best spare ten minutes, he went to the nearest coffee-house, and had a chop or steak, as the case might be. From which it will be clearly seen, that the accountant was not labouring for creature comforts — for rich dishes and old wines, for soft couches and idle hours; but that he was working either for work's sake, or for some object far outside the round of his daily and yearly existence.

And what an existence that was! What a dull, monotonous road it would have seemed to most, unrelieved as it was by social intercourse, unlightened by domestic ties; with no friend to talk to, no wife to love, no child to caress, no parent to provide for. A lonesome, laborious life, which had little in it, even of change of employment; for, so soon as one man's books were balanced, or schedule prepared, another merchant or bankrupt stood at the door, and behold, the same routine had to be gone through again. But monotony did not weary the accountant. Give him work enough, and strength sufficient to toil eighteen hours a day, and he was content. If he could have taken more out of himself he would have done it; but, as that was impossible, he laboured through all the working days of the week, and up to twelve o'clock on Saturday nights; as I hope, you, my reader, may never have to labour for any cause whatsoever.

As is the fashion of the Londoners, those who knew Mr. Geith — whom they called Mr. Grant — ever so slightly, asked him to come to dinner, tea, supper, what he would on Sunday, and because he persistently declined these invitations, people said the accountant worked seven days in the week, on his treadmill in Fen Court.

But in this instance people were wrong. Whether he were a saint or a sinner, George Geith still kept the Sabbath day holy, so far as refraining from labour, could keep it so. He put aside his business, and laid down his pen. He went to church, moreover, in the mornings regularly. Sometimes, too, he walked to Westminster Abbey, or to St. Paul's, for afternoon service; but that was seldom, for he usually slept until tea; after which meal he started off to one or other of the City churches, making in this way, quite a little visitation of his own during the course of a twelve-month.

A strange life — one so apparently terrible to an outsider in its voluntary loneliness, that his clients marvelled how he could support it. And yet, my reader, if I can succeed in putting you on friendly terms with this solitary individual, you will come gradually to understand, why this existence was not unendurable to him.

It is getting dark in Fen Court, as we stand beside the railings in the gathering twilight. The offices have long been closed; the housekeepers' children have left their marbles and their skipping-ropes, and are gone home to bed. The twitter of the sparrows is hushed, and there is nothing to be heard save the faint hum of the City traffic, and the rustling of the leaves, as the evening breeze touches them caressingly.

It is getting darker and darker, so dark in fact that there is little more to be seen of Fen Court to-night; but still, have patience for a moment. This man, whose story I have undertaken to tell as well as I am able, has just separated himself from the living stream flowing eastward along Fenchurch Street, and is coming

up the passage. You can hear his footsteps ringing through the silence. Hark! how they echo beneath the archway — quick, firm, even, unhurried. There is no shadow of turning or wavering about that tread. Listen to the footfalls; you cannot distinguish the left from the right; there is no drag, no twist, no irregularity. Do you think the man whom nature has taught to walk like that would be a person to refrain from using whip and spur if he had an object to compass?

I tell you, no. As he passes us in the gloom of the summer evening, unmindful of the graves lying to his left, and deaf to the low, sad tale the wind is whispering among the leaves, I tell you he is a man to work so long as he has a breath left to draw; who would die in his harness rather than give up; who would fight against opposing circumstances whilst he had a drop of blood in his veins; whose greatest virtues are untiring industry and indomitable courage, and who is worth half a dozen ordinary men, if only because of his iron frame and unconquerable spirit.

He has let himself in by this time with his latch-key, taken such letters as are intended for his firm out of the box, and proceeded up the easy, old-fashioned staircase, past the painting hanging on the first landing, and so into his own office, where he lights the gas, which, flaring out across the churchyard, clears a little space for its reflection out of the blackness of the opposite wall.

Night after night the flare and reflection tell the same tale of patient labour, of untiring application.

It seems strange that the figures did not dance before his eyes, and chase each other up and down his desk. With many a one the pence would have

nodded across to the pounds, and the shillings become confused with their neighbours' columns; but the accountant suffered his puppets to take no such liberties.

In the course of a year he went through miles of addition without a stumble; what he carried never perplexed him; midway up the shillings he never got crazed as common mortals might, but mounted gallantly to the summit as a racer goes straight to the winning-post, without a pause.

The skeins of silk which, in the old fairy tale, the godmother gave to her godchild to disentangle were nothing, compared to the arithmetical confusions out of which George Geith produced order. The chaos of figures from whence he managed to extract a fair balance-sheet would have seemed hopeless to any person untrained to passages of arms with the numeration table.

The mass of accounts through which he waded in the space of twelve months was of itself almost incredible. Alps on Alps of figures he climbed with silent patience, and the more Alps he climbed the higher rose great mountains of arithmetic in the background — mountains with gold lying on their summits for him to grasp and possess.

If you would like to see the man who thus laboured through the monotonous routine of an accountant's daily life, I do not know that any better opportunity than the present is likely to occur; for, with one foot stretched wearily on the floor, and the other resting on the rail of his office-stool, he is sitting beside his desk, with the gaslight streaming full on his face,

sorting out the letters he has just brought up-stairs with him.

There are eight in all — seven of which he places in a little heap ready to his hand, whilst the other is pushed on one side till the last. He is not handsome, certainly! Too common-place looking to be the hero of a novel, you object, perhaps; but you are wrong there. Somehow it is these rough-hewn men who stand at the helms of the best craft that sail across the ocean of existence. Looking over the portraits of those who have laboured hardest and longest in the fields of science, literature, theology, and human progress, we find that nature has been niggardly with them in the matter of beauty. Possibly the better the quality of her coin, the less pains she takes in stamping it for the world's market: but let this be as it may, I would rather accept George Geith's stern hard face for that of my hero, than have to tell the life's story of a handsomer man.

He was fit for the fight he had to wage; and it is something to be permitted to tell of the struggles of one, who, having elected to go down into the battle, bore the heat and burden of the day, and the agony of the wounds he received during the conflict without a murmur.

A man, moreover, who was able to work, not merely fiercely, but patiently; for whom no task was too long, no labour too severe. Look in his face and see how it is scored all over with the marks of determination and energy; look at the square forehead with two deep vertical lines graven on it, at the dark resolute eyes, at the well-marked unarched brows, at the straight decided nose, at the nostrils that expand and

quiver a little when he is struck hard, as will sometimes happen in business — the only sign of feeling ever to be traced in his features.

As for his mouth, were that mass of disfiguring hair away, you would see, how naturally, as his thoughts get to work, his lips compress and harden, not with the mannerism to be noted in weak women and weaker men, but with that fixed rigidity of the muscles never to be found save in a person who is strong mentally, and physically; strong in planning, in executing, in loving, in hating, for good or for evil.

There are the outward and visible signs of this strength in George Geith, in his face, in his carriage, in his speech, in his movements. As he now sits reading his letters, his disengaged hand lies on the desk clenched, as though he held the purpose and fruition of his life within it.

There is a significance likewise about the fashion of his beard which he wears cut and trimmed carefully; not a straggling hair is to be seen in the brown mass which covers the lower part of his face like a gorse hedge.

In the days when you, my reader, make this man's acquaintance, hair was no passport to credit, and people wondered at the accountant's defiance of City prejudices; but they need not have wondered, for he had suffered his beard to grow under the same impulse as that which induces a criminal to stain his skin, and don strange clothes when the police are on his track. In his despair he had dived into the great sea of London life, and when he rose to the surface again he was so changed that not even the parish clerk of Morelands

would have recognised him, had he seen the accountant sitting under his official nose.

And yet seven years before, the Reverend George Geith had been well known at Morelands; but that was in the days when he was curate there, before the night when the one great folly of his youth came home to him in all its bitterness, when he tore the white neck-cloth from his throat and flung aside the surplice, and fled from the Church to recross her portals, as a servant of God no more.

To London he came to seek his fortune. In a feigned name he sought employment, which he found at last in the offices of Horne Brothers, accountants, Prince Street, City. For five weary years he stayed there, wandering through labyrinths of figures, and applying himself so closely to learn his business thoroughly, that, when at length he summoned up courage to start on his own account, he carried with him to Fen Court a very respectable number of clients, profitable to him, but so small in the estimation of the great house, that Hornes suffered them to drop through the large meshes of their trade-net without a regret.

Very patiently he had worked his way on; no business was too paltry or insignificant for him, and thus it came to pass that one man brought another, and one transaction led to more. He had succeeded; he was doing well. Let that suffice for our purpose, without speaking further of the weary toil, of the incessant labour, by which success had been achieved.

Even as Jacob served Laban for Rachel, so George Geith was serving fortune was something which was dear to him as the maid to the patriarch — Freedom.

Money could give him freedom, and accordingly for money he toiled.

Let the day be never so long, he fainted not; let the heat be never so intense, he sought no cool shade in which to rest. Onward, ever onward, from early morning till late at night he hasted, turning not to the right hand nor to the left, but keeping the goal of emancipation ever in view, toiled steadily on.

People marvelled how he was able to continue the pace, but they did not know of the whip which was lashing him on. If he were ever to taste the sweets of liberty; if he were ever to resume his proper name and his rightful station in the future he must work like a slave in the present.

And as a traveller, when seeking some far-off land of golden promise, pauses not to seek rest or companions, in the country through which he is passing, so George Geith, hurrying on his road to freedom, took no heed of the roughness and loneliness of the path he was traversing.

Money was what he lacked; money what he hoped to gain; and rocks and stones seemed like smoothest turf under his feet whilst he pressed onward to obtain it.

"A few years more," he had been thinking, as he came up the passage, "a few years more, and I shall have enough to free myself." And then he entered the house as we have seen.

When he had finished reading his other letters, the accountant lifted that he first laid aside, and slowly turned it over with the air of a person who expected no pleasure to result from the perusal.

It was directed to Grant & Co., Accountants, Fen

Court, Fenchurch Street, City; and the man who opened the letter, knew it came from the only person in London, who could say, for a certainty, that the Rev. George Geith was living, and in England.

As no pleasant news had ever come, or was ever likely to come, to Fen Court through his instrumentality, the accountant pulled out the contents of the envelope leisurely.

Within the outer cover there was an enclosure directed to the Rev. George Geith, which enclosure contained three documents, viz., a note, a letter, and a telegraphic message. The last Mr. Geith read the first, and as he did so his face altered in a moment.

Energy, firmness, and impassiveness, were struck out of it at once by surprise, by an amazement which made him feel like one reading in his sleep. There was no further hesitation after that. He tore open the letter to see what the message really meant; he seized the note and glanced at the few lines it contained. After that he turned to the telegram once again, and read and re-read it, till the words danced before his eyes.

Was it true? — was he free? Had death done for him, in an instant, that which it would have taken years of work, and all the money he could have earned by work, to have accomplished.

Was it certain that this great deliverance had been effected; that the incubus of his life was removed; that the shackles were struck off, and the prison-door opened, and he at liberty to walk forth into that fair land of freedom, which he had left so long, so long ago?

For a moment the accountant covered his face with his hands, and sat with his eyes shut to assure

himself, when he opened them again, he had not been dreaming. Then he read the note and the letter and the telegram once more, and after he had read, he went for a moment into his back office, whence he returned carrying the clerical directory in his hand.

He wanted to see if the name of the clergyman, whose letter lay before him, was to be found in the book. Very eagerly he ran his finger down the page: Claell; Clafield; Claike; Clarke; Claull; Claydon; Clayfield, Arthur; Clayfield, Charles M.; Clayfield, Francis — yes, there he was at last; Clayfield, Honourable Ferdinand G., Vicar of Lute, St. Austills, Trevannick, Cornwall.

He was a reality, then. The thick note-paper, the clerically illegible handwriting, the large seal and imposing crest, had concealed no deception, covered no snare. The person who had cursed his life was dead, and he by consequence free.

Having arrived at which conclusion, the accountant took off his neckcloth, and unfastened his shirt-collar. Each man has his own especial way of evincing happiness, and that was Mr. Geith's.

Further, if he had not done something of the kind he must have suffocated; even as it was he felt his veins were not large enough to let the blood pour through them. His head seemed full of pain, the gaslight flickered and danced before his eyes, and as he left the desk and walked across the room to his writing-table, he staggered like a drunken man.

And truly the news he had just received was enough to shake the firmness of any one. A man cannot pass from one existence into another without a throe, and the change which had taken place in

George Geith's life was like nothing save passing from the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death, back into the glorious noon-day of life, and hope, and youth.

Between the chimes of the clock, liberty had come through the passage, and along the churchyard, and up the stairs, to sit down beside the accountant in his lonely office. At nine he was a slave, at a quarter past nine, free, and striving with a gasp to realize that he was so.

How poor and insignificant any deliverance he could have wrought out for himself in the days to come, seemed to this! It was like what filing through chains of iron with a rusty nail might be in comparison to having the fetters struck off with a smith's sledge. Death had emancipated him, and he was glad. In that hour he had no pity to spare for the sinner departed; no prayer to mutter for the soul called so suddenly to its account.

George Geith was neither a very sensitive nor a very scrupulous man; he was fitted to fight out his fight bravely, but without much compunction, and so he never thought of mingling a regret with his joy, or of baring his head and humbling himself in the dust whilst the chariot of the Lord rolled by. Through the portals of eternity, held open for a moment by the hand of death, he never turned to gaze; he only looked out over the future of his own life, which he was now free to travel as he pleased.

How he travelled it; what he made of it, how the bitter folly of his youth, mingled with his cup when it tasted the sweetest and seemed full to the brim with happiness and content, you shall know, reader, if you

have patience to follow his fortunes through the pages to come.

Meanwhile he has gone over to his desk again, and, having put aside his letters, got to work. We may go out of the office now and leave him to himself.

CHAPTER III.

Business.

OVER all sorts of human feelings, the Jugger-naught of business rolls relentlessly. It spares neither sorrow nor joy in its progress; and there are no smiles so bright, no tears so bitter that they can drag, even for a moment, the wheels of that inexorable car. Let the sickness be ever so fatal, let the dead in her coffin have been ever so dear, still if business is to go on at all, the sick must be left and the dead forsaken, and the merest details of every-day commercial life attended to, though a man's heart should be breaking. Money must be lodged and paid, bills met, goods sent for shipment, letters answered, customers admitted, though the eyes that were wont to light up the now desolate home are closed, and the voice which made melody in the deserted rooms, is mute for ever. Shall sorrow stop the trains, keep vessels in the dock, prevent office doors being opened? No surely; nor shall joy, not even such joy as George Geith felt when he opened his eyes on the following morning, and satisfied himself by another perusal of his letter, that the liberty which had come to him the previous night was not a dream. Whether bond or free, it was necessary he should live, and so he thankfully turned himself to

business once again, and remained in Fen Court, working as hard, and as fiercely, as ever.

Most men who had been bred up to the church, and compelled to leave it solely by the pressure of external circumstances, would, when once that pressure was withdrawn, have seriously considered whether they ought not to return to their old profession.

Not so George Geith, however. He did not feel the old vows bind him. He acknowledged no obligation to return to curate's work and curate's pay. He had settled the matter of relinquishing the church years ago with his own conscience, and although circumstances were much altered since then, he was not the man to reopen a disagreeable controversy with himself, and resume an argument in which, free as he was in the present to choose his course, he would have been sure to get the worst of the discussion. The years which had brought liberty with them had brought likewise a knowledge of his own aptitude for business, and inaptitude for parish work. In the days when he was compelled to make his decision, it had seemed to him a calamity to have to leave the Church; but now the calamity would be to have to return to the Church, to relinquish the busy world of business and profit, the future of wealth and independence, for some country parish, where he should have to try and please the village gossips, be deferential to his rector, christen the labourers' children, bury the poor, and marry those whose banns had first been duly published.

It was not a temporal lot to be coveted by a man of his temperament; and as temporal advantages were the gods of George Geith's idolatry, as loaves and fishes were much more to his taste than any form of

spiritual refreshment that could be offered him; as he had in the first instance decided to be a clergyman solely because his father had been one, because his friends wished it, and because there was a desirable living in the Geith family, it will readily be believed that having found there was a more excellent worldly way to rank and wealth and ease, he was not likely to return to the path he had abandoned, and become either a poor curate, with good connections certainly, but without private means, or the hanger-on of a great house, the windows whereof commanded a view of the smoke curling up from the chimneys of Great Snareham Rectory.

From the clerical directory he knew that the old incumbent was still alive; and he knew, likewise, that his aunt, Lady Geith, and his cousin, Sir Mark, would give him the living whenever it fell in, and settle the question of his sudden flight from Morelands, and long absence from the Church, with the Bishop, whilst that dignitary ate his luncheon at Snareham Castle.

It was no doubt about his old advantages being restored to him that kept George Geith in Fen Court. It was just this, he liked business better than preaching or praying, or visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction; and, accordingly, without arguing out the matter, or giving it more than the most casual consideration, he decided on remaining an accountant. And if a clergyman's engagement with the Church be dissoluble, if it be but a matter of service and payment, of temporal expediency and earthly reward, he was right. But, on the other hand, if entering the Church be marrying for time and eternity, if the vows vowed are irrevocable, if the choice, once made,

whether hastily or after mature consideration, be one by which a man ought to abide through life, he was wrong. Anyhow, he remained in Fen Court, and that may suffice for us, for it is not with the tender scruples of a sensitive man we shall have to do in these volumes, not with the self-analysis of a subjective nature, but rather with the life's fight of one who now victorious, now defeated, struggled on till he reached the summit of his hopes, a disappointed man!

See him as he sits in his office, looking over his desk at the waving boughs and the rustling leaves that dance and are glad in the summer sunshine! Life is before him, and he is free.

He has lost years and years certainly, but at thirty-two a man has still the best part of his life to traverse, and he who can start from that point with nothing to hinder his making a good thing of the remainder of the road, may truly be esteemed one of the favourites of fortune.

And this man? He has health, a clear conscience, a strong body, a vigorous mind.

He is willing to work, and has got work to do; he is succeeding in his profession; he can resume his old name. He can, if he pleases, seek out his relatives, and establish a connection between the City and one of the oldest and proudest families in Bedfordshire. Or, if he did not care to do that, he could at any rate walk about the world a free and independent man, dogged no more by the dread of discovery, and he could work with a light heart, knowing what he earned was his own, and would never again have to be laid

aside and devoted to that purpose which had eaten seven years out of the very heart and glory of his life.

Now, come friend, come foe, George Geith was indifferent. The one enemy who could have beggared, and disgraced, him was lying at last in a churchyard, far away in Cornwall. After seven years — seven years that had altered every plan of his life, obliterated the prejudices of birth, taken him out of the Church, and flung him into the midst of a struggling, pushing world, to fight for his daily bread, George Geith was free.

Seven years! what would the next seven bring to him? For days the accountant asked himself that question; as he walked along the streets, as he ate his breakfast, and swallowed his dinner; he saw, not the crowds in the City thoroughfares, not his dingy back office, not the blank formality of Billiter Square, not the comfortless surroundings of the dirty chop-house; but estates, and houses, and happiness, all possessed by George Geith, who, with grave face and sober demeanour, saw visions and dreamed dreams!

What business man has not done this? Who, standing on the borders of that speculative land, which is so fair to all, and which holds gifts for so few, has not bought and sold, and sowed and reaped, and laboured, and received abundantly?

Talk of the imagination of poets; what are their wildest fancies in comparison to those which fill the brains of speculators?

And this is the true fascination of business. Beyond its weary details, beyond its toils, beyond its certainties, beyond its endless necessities and countless annoyances, lies the limitless region of possibility, which is possessed

in fancy by thousands who might seem to you, my reader, commonplace men enough.

That land is boundless, beautiful, happy. It is the El Dorado of struggling men, the heaven of inventors; it is the sun which shines into dingy offices, which gilds dark clouds that would otherwise overwhelm with their blackness tired and anxious hearts.

Into this land the minds of silent and undemonstrative men pass the most readily. And it was because George Geith was to a great extent self contained, and unconfiding, that he clothed the future with such glorious hues and radiant apparel.

And yet as this future had to be won with work, the glimpses he caught of it, instead of inducing idleness, only made him labour more determinedly in the present.

There was nothing in the prospect of rest which caused him to loathe his harness. At sight of the distant pastures, and the far-off streams, he merely quickened his pace onward.

Every step he took over the City stones, every letter he wrote, every piece of business he completed, brought the end closer, the journey nearer to a conclusion.

Freed from the danger of detection, George Geith once again made himself a bondsman.

Never a master lashed on a slave to labour as business now lashed on the accountant. It drove him, it hurried him, he lived in it and for it, far more than he lived by it.

He had worked so long fiercely, that his mind seemed cramped unless his body was always labouring a little beyond its strength. The object for which he

had toiled was gone, but it is easy to install a pleasant object in place of an unpleasant one; and so for wealth instead of for freedom he began to labour, and soon every faculty was stretched, in the race he had set himself to run.

He had not a near relation living. Without wife, child, father or mother, sister or brother, he slaved for himself, as few men slave for their families. He made a god out of that which was sapping his health and strength; and he fell down and worshipped it, day after day, and night after night, whilst the wind sobbed among the leaves of the trees, and the dead who, it might be, had some of them worshipped Mammon too, slept inside the rusty railings forgotten and forsaken.

So passed the autumn, and it was winter. The finest season of the year had departed, and George Geith was glad. The most profitable time was at hand — and the footsteps of clients, old and new, made pleasant music in the accountant's ear, as they ascended the stairs, leading to his second-floor.

Bankrupts, men who were good enough, men who were doubtful, and men who were (speaking commercially) bad, had all alike occasion to seek the accountant's advice and assistance. Retailers, who kept clerks for their sold books, but not for their bought; wholesale dealers who did not want to let their clerks see their books at all. Shrewd men of business, who yet could not balance a ledger; ill-educated traders, who though they could make money, would have been ashamed to show their ill-written and worse spelled journals to a stranger; unhappy wretches shivering on the brink of insolvency; creditors who did not think much of the cooking of some dishonest debtor's ac-

counts — all these came and sat in George Geith's back office, and waited their turn to see him.

First come, first served, was the accountant's rule in business; and one which I rather think contributed largely to his success. One of the blood-royal would not in that office have taken precedence of John Oakes and Tom Styles; and it is these latter gentlemen who, after all, are more profitable customers than the Upper Ten Thousand, if tradespeople could only think so.

Country gentry indeed, who came to the City by rail, and west-end folks who made the City more crowded with their cabs, were somewhat disgusted at a regulation which failed to recognise their superiority over the east-end herd; but never was any one more indignant than an individual who, having made a journey to town, solely on purpose to visit the office of Grant and Co., found himself left in the background, whilst common people were ushered into the presence chamber — vulgar people evidently in trade, whom the clerk would have hinted to any less stately customer, were a "muslin, two teas, and a cheese."

But this tall, portly country gentleman, who stood looking out at the drizzling rain which was wetting the pavement of Billiter Square, would not have understood what he meant, and would not have smiled at the description if he had; and it was quite a relief to the clerk when he knew by the closing of the other office door, that the stranger's turn had come at last.

"Mr. Geith is at leisure now, sir," said the youth, and he rose and opened the door of communication for the new client to pass through. Had the new client been of an observant nature he might have noticed that to the rest the clerk had merely nodded permis-

sion to enter; but, wrapped up in his own affairs, he only remembered that others had obtained an audience before him, and so entering the inner office with the air of an injured man, opened the pleadings as follows.

CHAPTER IV.

The Sythlow-Mines.

"I HAVE been kept waiting; I have been detained above an hour," he said, and from his manner of saying it, Mr. Geith saw waiting had not improved his temper.

"I am sorry," answered the accountant, "that it has so happened, but my rule is that the first comer sees me first. We business men," he explained, "cannot afford to be other than democrats, and the peer and the peasant stand on an equality in a City office, if they bring work in their hands with them."

"I dare say your rule is a good one," was the reply, uttered in a tone which implied that the introduction of a general proposition, into a conversation with the speaker was too presumptuous to be pleasing. "I dare say your rule is a good one, though it has occasioned inconvenience to myself. I came from Hertfordshire this morning in order to see Mr. Grant?"

"My name is Geith," said George, answering the implied question; "but it is all the same, I manage the business."

"But I wanted to see Mr. Grant," replied the visitor, looking all round the room as if in search of that mythical individual. "I wish to consult him on a matter of some importance and —"

"I assure you Mr. Grant is never here," interposed

the accountant. "I am the managing partner in the firm, and as such have the sole conduct of all affairs that may be intrusted to us. If you will tell me the nature of your business I shall be most happy to advise you to the best of my ability." And Mr. Geith having first handed his visitor a chair, mounted his stool, and looked attentively at his new client, who in turn stared hard at him.

It was very little the accountant could discover from his scrutiny, beyond the fact of the new comer being a gentleman, which fact he had ascertained the moment he entered the room.

A florid, middle-aged, blue-eyed, light-haired, hot-tempered individual, who looked like a country squire, but who might have been anything, from a nobleman to a small landed-proprietor. George could not conceive what his important business might be, so he waited till the other had completed his survey and intimated that he felt comparatively satisfied with the appearance of the accountant by announcing himself to be "Mr. Molozone."

Mr. Geith had some vague recollection of having heard of an old and respectable county family of that name, and acknowledged the information with suitable respect.

"Having some money lying idle," proceeded Mr. Molozone, "I thought I would call and ask your opinion of the Sythlow Mines."

"Our business has no connection with mines," replied the accountant. "You would probably gain the information you require from a mining engineer."

"What do I want with mining engineers?" broke out Mr. Molozone. "What do I want with a parcel of

fellows who would recommend anything for the sake of their commission? I require a disinterested opinion — an opinion on which I can depend."

"It would be impossible for me to offer one," said Mr. Geith: "for, in the first place, we are merely accountants, and, in the second, I never heard of the Sythlow Mines before."

"But you could ascertain particulars."

"I doubt it," was the reply; "and even if I could I should decline interfering in the matter. It is out of our line altogether."

"You have come in contact with mines, though," urged Mr. Molozone.

"With those who have been ruined by them, yes," returned Mr. Geith. He was sorry next minute for having spoken the words, for he saw the strong man wince at them — wince and shiver.

"Had you not better consult your solicitor?" he continued, becoming interested in spite of himself in his visitor.

"I have no solicitor in London, and I do not want my man of business in the country to know anything about the matter. The truth is —" and here Mr. Molozone left his chair and came and stood beside the accountant's desk — "the truth is, I have taken shares in those cursed mines, and I have come to you to know whether they will bring ruin to me or not."

"Why to me?" asked George, in amazement.

"Because a sort of cousin of mine told me Grant & Co. were to be depended on. I dare say you remember him, Mr. Croft, a clergyman."

George Geith did. He remembered the rev. gentlemen getting himself into pecuniary trouble, and

coming to that very office three or four times a day to see "how he stood." He remembered he had often wished Mr. Croft far enough, and he now began to marvel, whether Mr. Molozane would prove another such infliction. While this passed through his mind he said,

"How can I possibly do what you wish? My business lies among certainties, not possibilities. I am no judge of mines. There is only one thing I do know, which is, that I should never invest one sixpence in them."

"Is a man liable to the extent of his shares?" was Mr. Molozane's comment on this speech.

"Certainly. And if the company be not on the cost principle he is liable to the extent of the company's liabilities. Is yours on the cost principle?"

"I am sure I cannot tell," said the dupe, faintly, "I know nothing about it except that they told me I should never have to pay more than the first instalment unless I chose, and that I should be able at any time to sell at a hundred per cent. profit."

"How many shares have you?" asked the accountant.

"One hundred, fifty-pound shares," was the reply.

"How much paid up?"

"Twenty pounds."

"What are they selling at now?"

"Half-a-crown; a temporary depression in the market, they say, but I cannot help feeling uneasy."

"Sell at half-a-crown," said Mr. Geith, on receipt of this intelligence. "Sell at any price, and get rid of them."

"Why five minutes ago, you stated you knew

nothing of the Sythlow Mines; that you had never heard of them. I do not understand your meaning, sir, not at all;" and the poor gentleman, who felt the ground giving way under his feet, stood at bay.

"My meaning is this," answered Mr. Geith, who could not feel offended at anything a man so placed might say; "that a company which induces the public to purchase shares by misrepresentation, and the fifty-pound shares in which are selling at half-a-crown, must be rotten, and the sooner you get clear of it the better."

"But I should lose nineteen hundred and eighty-seven pounds," said Mr. Molozane, with a readiness which proved he had gone through the calculation before; "and to think of the sum I expected to make — of all the plans I built on that d——d lead! I cannot give everything up, Mr. Geith — I cannot sell."

For a moment the accountant paused and hesitated before he said: "As I understand, the case stands thus. You have accepted an indefinite liability which you can get rid of at the cost of a definite loss; were I so situated, I should submit to the loss, rather than continue the liability. You know to-day that nineteen hundred and eighty-seven pounds odd will be the extent of your misfortune, but you have no means of knowing what sum it will take to set you straight hereafter."

"You think, in fact, the mine might swallow up all I have?" asked Mr. Molozane, with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

"It is possible," answered the accountant, and his visitor resumed his chair.

"Could you ascertain what the mines are thought

of in London?" said Mr. Molozane after a time, with that vague belief in the value and safety of metropolitan opinion, which is so distinguishing a peculiarity of country people.

"Probably I could," was the reply. "I will endeavour to do so to-morrow, and communicate the result."

"To-day, sir, to-day, for God's sake!" urged his client; and thus exhorted, George Geith wrote on a slip of paper —

"DEAR SIR, — Can you send me any information about the Sythlow Mines? Are they a safe investment; who is the secretary, and how does the company stand?" "Yours, G. G."

This slip he told his clerk to take over to Mr. Bemmidge's office in Nicholas Lane, and wait an answer.

Having done this, he handed *The Times* to Mr. Molozane, and commenced writing letters that were to go out by that night's mail.

Whilst he was so engaged, people who had entered the outer office, and found no one there, knocked at the inner door for admittance. Then the accountant called out, "Come in," and laying down his pen, listened to what they had to say; or if the business proved of a private nature, went into the other office with them.

As a rule, he did not leave either friend or stranger alone in his own sanctum; but he felt no fear of Mr. Molozane scrutinizing his papers. The unfortunate shareholder evidently did not belong to that class of per-

sons who cannot let a chance pass of examining into the state of other men's affairs, let their own anxiety be what it will.

Wearily the minutes passed to the visitor. He would have liked to lay down *The Times* and pace the room, but he feared disturbing Mr. Geith. The great silence of the place — that silence of London, which is so much more intense than silence in the country — wore him out.

Through the silence, the clock above the door ticked on relentlessly, and Mr. Molozone listened to the sound till it seemed as though his heart were ticking too, louder and faster than the clock.

When strangers entered he screened his face with the newspaper, and tried to help hearing what they said.

When they left he looked out of the window near which he sat, at the blackened walls surrounding the old churchyard, and the trees which grew within the railings, and waved their branches mournfully to the dull sky, whilst the rain kept drip, dripping on to the damp graves beneath.

At last the clerk came back, stating in explanation of his long absence, that Mr. Bemmidge, after reading the note, went out — telling him to wait. On his return he gave the messenger the fly-leaf of an old letter twisted up, with these words written in pencil on it:

"The Sythlow shares are not worth the value of the paper on which they are issued. Don't let any one you know, invest in them. The company is not on the cost-book principle, and the secretary is Punt. I need say no more."

"Why need he say 'no more'?" asked Mr. Molozone, as the accountant concluded.

"Because there is not a greater scoundrel in London," was the reply. "You must not lose an hour; you must sell whilst selling is possible."

"Give me a glass of water," said Mr. Molozone, and Mr. Geith requested his clerk to bring some, which he did, in a jug; carrying it and a tumbler in on a waiter.

When he had emptied the jug, Mr. Molozone rose, and taking out his purse with a hand that would tremble spite of all his efforts at composure, said — "I do not know how much I am your debtor, but if you will ——"

"You are not my debtor at all," interrupted the accountant; "mines are not our business, and I have done no business for you. I only wish I could have given you better news. Nay," he added, "I cannot make a charge. I might just as well take a fee for telling a stranger his way to St. Paul's."

"You are very good. I fear I have intruded most unwarrantably; I am sorry — I am greatly obliged;" and Mr. Molozone held out his hand in a manner which proved he was only paying Mr. Geith in civility because he declined payment in money.

There could be no doubt but that Mr. Molozone thought shaking hands with a man in business was conferring an honour on the individual so favoured.

Many a person reading this thought would have resented the condescension, but the accountant pitied his visitor too much for that, and shook hands cordially.

"Your broker will be too late to sell to-day," he

remarked, "but you might instruct him to dispose of the shares to-morrow."

"I do not know any broker," said Mr. Molozone, dolefully.

"Nor do I personally," was the reply. "Smart and Stewart, in Broad Street, are considered very respectable people; you could scarcely do better than go to them."

"Thank you;" and Mr. Molozone was about to depart, when George asked him if he knew his way to Broad Street.

The misguided man of course did not, but meant to inquire, and expressed himself gratefully when the accountant told him "to turn to his right on getting out of Fen Court, and keep straight on to the end of Fenchurch Street. After that," proceeded Mr. Geith, "turn to your right again up Gracechurch Street, cross the first opportunity, and take the second turning to your left, which is Threadneedle Street; Broad Street is the first turning to your right going down Threadneedle Street."

All of which directions Mr. Molozone followed, and got safe into Broad Street; but there he lost himself and got into Austinfriars, where he floundered about for a while, and finally turned up in Great Winchester Street.

At that point some benevolent individual took him in charge — conveyed him back to Broad Street *via* London Wall, and deposited him at the door of Messrs. Smart and Stewart's office.

"Want shares sold out of the Sythlow Mining Co.!" repeated Mr. Smart, who was a little old man with white hair, a sharp nose, and spectacles; "you are not

singular, but it cannot be done. We could not get rid of them for you if we offered a premium for taking them. Very sorry to hear you have shares; a bad business — very;" and Mr. Smart, taking snuff, offered his box to Mr. Molozone.

It was a poor way, perhaps, of evincing sympathy, but he really intended the pinch as consolatory.

He was very sorry to hear that portly-looking country gentleman had shares in the undertaking, for he knew well enough that to the majority of those who were so unfortunate, there was an end coming, which end was — ruin.

CHAPTER V.

A Friendly Invitation.

THE letters were written and posted; the clerk had taken down his great-coat, tied a white comforter in many folds round his neck, brushed his hat with his sleeve, and departed, shutting the outer door of the house after him, and George Geith was at last alone and free to linger a few minutes over his tea. From first thing in the morning he had been listening, talking, writing, or walking. He had not found leisure for any dinner, so he was breaking his fast with a chop the housekeeper had cooked for him, when a loud knock resounded through the house, and next moment Mr. Bemmidge entered the room.

"Don't let me interrupt you," he said, taking off his hat and unbuttoning his top-coat as he spoke. "What a night it is! The rain is coming down as if you were pouring it out of buckets. Thank you, I will take a cup of tea; shall I call Mrs. Grimsby?"

But Mrs. Grimsby, who knew Mr. Bemmidge's ways, was already in the room with a second cup and saucer, having placed which articles on the table, she waited for the teapot, and departed in triumph to replenish it.

"Bachelor's tea, Bemmidge," said Mr. Geith apologetically to his friend, who had by this time planted himself in front of the fire, with both feet on the fender.

"Always good," replied Mr. Bemmidge. "I think there ought to be an especial clause in the marriage service, securing a strong cup to married men."

"One would think Mrs. Bemmidge treated you badly in that respect," remarked the accountant.

"So she does, but not worse than other wives treat their husbands; indeed, tea is the only thing we ever have a row about. It's strange, isn't it? Mothers can make tea, and sisters too, but wives can't; and yet one would think they must have been sisters once, and will some day be the mothers of great hulking boys. Ah! when I was single and in lodgings, used not I to make the tea black? It was like ink. Some fellows that came to see me then will talk about my tea yet. I had to ask them not to mention it before Mrs. B., for it set her back up regularly; and as she is as good a wife as ever breathed, it is a shame to vex her. What fires you do keep up, to be sure!" and Mr. Bemmidge thrust the poker between the bars as though the heat were not fierce enough already.

"And what about the mines?" he added.

"Do you mean was the information sufficient?" asked Mr. Geith. "If so, it was a little too sufficient for the person on whose behalf I made the inquiry; he had taken shares."

"Poor devil!" ejaculated Mr. Bemmidge; "he may put up his shutters."

"I don't think that he is in any business," said the accountant. "Has private means, I should imagine."

"If I were in his shoes, then, I should sell my sticks, pack up, and bolt," observed Mr. Bemmidge. "The Sythlow Mines will be the worst smash-up that we have seen for years. Mark my words if they are not. Do you know, I got quite in a fidget lest it was on your own behalf you were inquiring, and that my advice should not be strong enough to hinder your taking the shares as bargains. You ought to write to your client, and advise him to decamp."

"I do not know what the man is," answered the other, "or where he lives, or anything about him, except that I am sure he would not do as you suggest. He will either shoot himself or face the evil. He will not run away."

"Then, unless he is remarkably lucky, he will have to be content with a front seat in the workhouse," said Mr. Bemmidge; and having sketched this pleasant future for Mr. Molozone, he swallowed another cup of tea, and pushed his chair a little further from the fire.

"I have come to ask you to do me a favour," he began, after a pause. "No, not that," he added hastily, as Mr. Geith rose to get his cheque-book. "Not that, though you have helped me over many an ugly stile. I want you to eat your Christmas dinner with us. Everything plain — no formality — all old friends. A dance and a rubber. You are such an unsociable fellow that I scarcely liked to ask you, only that Mrs.

B. would have it. In fact, she said, 'If you do not bring Mr. Grant, I must fetch him myself.'"

"Mrs. Bemmidge is extremely kind," said the accountant.

"Not a bit of it. We are all wanting to have you. Even my little girl is always asking when I am going to bring Mr. Rant home."

"What makes you call me Grant, Bemmidge?" asked the accountant as coolly as though he had never assumed the name.

"What makes me call you Grant?" repeated Mr. Bemmidge, turning his soft, womanish eyes on his friend in amazement. "What do you mean? What else should I call you?"

"Geith. I am not Grant, but the Co."

"And who is Grant?"

"My principal!" and Mr. Geith said this as soberly as a judge.

"The deuce he is; and why is he never here?"

"You might as well have asked me ten minutes since why you never saw the Co."

"I always thought the Co a myth," was the frank reply.

"And, on the same principle, you think Grant a myth now, I suppose," suggested the accountant.

"No," said Mr. Bemmidge; "no, I don't; I believe in Grant, and that he makes you work as if you had not another day to live. Have not I hit the mark now?"

"Pretty nearly; for years I have worked for Grant, but now, I may tell you in confidence, I am working for myself. I shall keep on the name of the firm, of course; but I am really my own master."

"That is right; that is as it should be. But now, look here, Geith, or whatever your name is, everybody calls you Grant, except this new clerk of yours, and I never could make out what the deuce he was saying."

"And everybody is welcome to call me Grant," retorted the accountant; "I can't stop to explain to all the people who come here, that I am not Grant; and if I did, I should have them discontented at the idea of being attended to by a subordinate. I have tried it, and don't mean to trouble myself about the matter any more. Geith, or Grant, what is the difference? Cain or Abel, Jones or Thompson, it is all one to me."

"But in case of property being left to you?"

"Left to me!" scoffed George; "when did you ever hear of property being left to a man living in a back office, and who works like a dray-horse? But even so, I could prove my identity. And, if you come to that, Bemmidge, how many men in London are trading under their own names? How many men are known to their business acquaintances by the names their fathers bore before them? Junior partners, surviving partners, new beginners, all pass for other and more important people than they are. Take your own case, Bemmidge, who is your Co.? Is he a man of capital, or a mere dummy, who represents what you wish in your soul you possessed? Or is it Mrs. Bemmidge, or your little girl?"

"You hit me hard," answered the wine merchant; "my Co. is but a graceful ending to a name that would look a little bald in advertising. Andrew Bemmidge and Company certainly sounds fuller than Andrew

Bemmidge by itself; but then, I am Bemmidge, and you are not Grant."

"Very true; but what difference does that make? There is a firm you do business with Rankin, Run-corn and Smith; what is the name of the partner you see?"

"Rankin, I believe."

"You are wrong, then, there is but one man in the firm, and his name is Jackson. There is a perfumer in Bishopsgate called Hume, and he trades under the firm of Lepard and Holini. As you go down Mincing Lane, you must have noticed a great brass plate with Huggins, Son, Huggins and Holt, on it. For a long time I thought that genuine, but one day I discovered the sole representative of that house to be a Mr. Black, who lives down at Grays. He came into the business through being the son-in-law of Huggins' son; but he does not think it expedient to change the name of the old firm, nor do I. It shall be Grant and Co. till the end of my tenancy, and those who like to call me Grant may do so."

"But you want me to call you Geith —"

"When a man asks me to his house," began George, "it changes the position. I could not accept your invitation if —"

"Then you will come. Thank you a hundred times; I shall make Mrs. Bemmidge's heart happy, spite of the anxieties of impending plum-pudding. Thank you," and Mr. Bemmidge wrung the accountant's hand. "Let me see, what is your name? Just spell it for me, there's a good fellow."

"I will give you a card," said George, and he

pulled one he had recently had engraved out of his purse. "What time do you dine — six o'clock?"

"Six! Lord, bless me, no! Three, sharp; but come at two — come at one."

"I could not do it," was the answer; "it will be as much as I can manage to get up to your house at three o'clock. Service won't be over, in any of the City churches, much before half-past one."

"You don't mean to say you go to church, and that kind of thing, and you a bachelor, too."

"Have not bachelors souls?" asked Mr. Geith, with praiseworthy gravity.

"Yes, I suppose so; but it seems singular. One expects married people to be religious, and so forth. Indeed, I often say to Mrs. Bemmidge myself, that, when the children grow up, we must begin — we must, really. You have surprised me. I always thought that because you would not come up to us, that you had it out on Sundays."

"Had what out?" asked George, who was for once fairly mystified.

"Had your sleep. Unless I am going out of town, I never rise on Sundays till twelve or one; so I fancied you, perhaps, did not get up till three or four."

"That is making it a day of rest with a vengeance," remarked the accountant.

"What should I do if I did get up?" was the reply. "Really you have astonished me! you go to church even on Christmas-day. Mrs. Bemmidge's mother will be delighted. She is always scolding because we don't attend to those things as she does. You see it is entirely a matter of constitution," finished Mr. Bemmidge, and George Geith did not contradict the statement.

He contented himself with shaking hands over again with his friend, assuring him he would be punctual, and remember the address.

"Ivy Cottage, Holloway Road, near the Archway Road," were Mr. Bemmidge's farewell words, ere he plunged out again into the pelting rain which came splashing down, and making dreary puddles in the graveyard.

For a minute George Geith's eyes followed him; then the accountant drew back into the house and closed the door, and ascended to his office thoughtfully.

"Now, I wonder what the deuce possessed me," he marvelled, as he stood before his fire; "I wonder what possessed me to say I would go. Have I not spent enough Christmas-days alone to be able to face another?" and George Geith looked at the blaze that went leaping up the chimney, while he asked himself these questions. Seven times, had the twenty-fifth of December come round since he left Morelands, and seven times had he passed the day with no other company save his own thoughts. In lodgings he had sat reading in solitary state while screams of laughter came ringing up that staircase, and the house shook with the dancing and the romping of his landlady's guests assembled in the first floor front. He could still see that landlady, all "brass and glass," sailing into his room, short, fat, and flounced, her hair covered with bugles, and her hands with mittens, to ask "if he would not come down just for half an hour to cheer him up a bit." A perfect recollection of her figure, clothed in a silk which had seen the grease of many a Christmas goose, to make no mention of a cotton-

velvet jacket which covered irremediable rents in her bodice, came to the accountant's mind. He remembered the lace that trimmed the sleeves, the edging of her flounces, the marvellous frogs that sported up the front of her jacket. He could recall her smiling, self-satisfied face, and the tone, half compassionate half deprecating, in which she preferred her request.

He followed her to the door disappointed at hearing he was not lonely, and did not care for society, and he heard the rustle of her dress and the pit-patting of her feet as she trotted away down-stairs again, and opened the drawing-room door through which a volley of laughter escaped, just as heated air rushes out through a ventilator.

He could remember that marvellous little pudding, about the size of a breakfast cup, which was always sent up by the maid-of-all-work, with "missus's compliments, and hopes you won't be offended, sir, but she made it herself;" said maid-of-all-work being in a chronic state of grin, consequent on Christmas boxes, excitement, and a new cap. He thought of dreary walks through wet streets — frosty streets — across the parks, over the bridges. He recollected going to bed after a day that seemed to have been thirty-six hours long, and waking out of a long sleep to hear the laughing still vehement below, and the clinking of glasses on the landing. He remembered once flying from Christmas in London, packing a carpetbag, relieving his landlady of his presence, and departing for Canterbury, where he put up at a second-rate hotel, in which, to his dismay, he found the landlord's son was lying dead up-stairs, as the waiter informed him at dinner, by way, doubtless, of improving his appetite.

There were no Christmas festivities in that house to annoy him, but he found Christmas with mourning plumes, worse than Christmas with holly, and mistletoe, and riotous laughter, and so never tried the experiment again.

Christmas in offices was a degree better, certainly, than Christmas in lodgings, for he was delivered from plum-pudding, and he had the Christian satisfaction of doing good unto others by taking care of the premises whilst the housekeeper and her husband went to Kennington to eat their goose with Mrs. G.'s mamma. But still Christmas, even in his own castle, with silent rooms and a good fire — his tea-things left ready, and a kettle on the hob — was dreary work; and the accountant found what most of us do find some time or other in our lives, that though we may live without our kind for three hundred and sixty-four days out of the year, there comes one day when we want some friend to speak to, and wish us the compliments of the season.

For this reason George Geith, now that he was free, accepted Mr. Bemmidge's invitation. Of Mrs. B. he knew no more, than that she economised her tea, and was, according to her husband's statement, the best wife that ever breathed. But he pictured her as rather a homely personage — a motherly, comfortable kind of woman, who might not perhaps be adapted to adorn any sphere, but who exactly suited the one in which Providence had placed her.

In this supposition, however, Mr. Geith was not quite correct, for Mrs. Bemmidge was neither motherly nor homely, nor a particularly good wife; on the contrary, she was rather one of those women whom Lon-

don breeds by thousands; who emerge from back parlours in dingy City streets, from little suburban villas, and from third-rate boarding schools, to make some honest man's life wretched, and to train up more girls to greater pretension, greater snobbishness, and less usefulness, than their mothers.

A mean woman withal, and yet extravagant, who was always pinching and saving, spilling and spending, who looked after ounces of sugar, and grudged extra slices of bread, and still who dressed well, ate well, slept softly, and took care of No. 1.

And this No. 1 was always sounding her own personal praises in her husband's ear. Who managed so well as she? who had so nice-looking a drawing-room? who looked after her servants so constantly? who skirmished with the tradespeople more incessantly? into whose house were greater bargains carried than into hers?

If Mr. Bemmidge or anybody else could answer these questions, she, Mrs. B., would be obliged to them, but as no one ever attempted to contradict her, said debt of gratitude to society was never contracted by the lady who had determined to know Mr. Geith.

For Mr. Bemmidge had employed no words of course when he said his wife would be made happy by the accountant sharing their Christmas dinner. It was no *façon de parler* to state that Mrs. Bemmidge had threatened to invade Fen Court herself. Mrs. Bemmidge had threatened and would have performed, only Mr. Geith's acceptance averted any such calamity. He was coming, "for certain," added her husband, and therefore Mrs. Bemmidge began to set her house in order; stuffed the fatted goose; lived in her kitchen; manu-

factured mince pies; mixed plum-pudding, and made herself as generally disagreeable as a fussy, managing, selfish, vulgar woman, can.

Little did Mr. Geith think, as he drove up the Holloway Road, of all the preparations which had been made in his honour; of the torments Mrs. Bemmidge had passed through, wondering what he liked best to eat and drink. Every imaginable dish, every obtainable beverage was had in his honour; and Mrs. Bemmidge herself, and Mr. B.'s mother and sister were duly ready to receive the stranger.

As for Mr. Bemmidge, he was waiting for his friend in the highway: and whenever Mr. Geith's cab came to a stand, the wine merchant opened the door, wrung his visitor's hand, wished him a merry Christmas, hurried him through the little green gate, up the gravel-walk, and into the house, where Mrs. Bemmidge met him, and saying, "this *is* kind," shook his hand with her own two; one being quite insufficient to express her feelings of pleasure and satisfaction.

"I really thought Mr. Grant, Geith I mean, that we never were going to see you;" and as she made this assertion Mrs. Bemmidge took him out of the dark hall into the lighter drawing-room, where he was introduced to Mrs. Gilling, Miss Gilling, and Mr. Foss.

After that ceremony he was permitted to sit down and commence making himself agreeable.

Whilst he did so, he looked at the ladies, and I should like you also, reader, to look at the feminine trio for a moment, before proceeding with my story.

Shall we give the *pas* to Miss Gilling — a creature all nature, all curls, all enthusiasm, all frankness, who

had a very white skin, and very black hair, very fine eyes, very small feet and hands, and a very passable figure.

Her age, you ask? I really do not know it. What with her manners, her curls, her *naiveté*, and her delight at small atoms of pleasure, she might have passed for sweet seventeen; but then Mrs. Bemmidge was three-and-thirty; and intimate friends said there was not much more than five or six years between them.

Anyhow, there was Miss Gilling, let her age be what it would, for Mr. Geith to fall in love with, if he liked.

As for Mrs. Gilling, she was a widow of small property and with many wants; a lady who said she had kept a set of servants — whatever number that may be; who had once had things “very different,” and who was now very glad to drop in about supper time three or four nights a week and partake of such hospitality as Mrs. Bemmidge extended to her. A dignified old lady, in a prodigious cap, who snubbed Andrew Bemmidge, and paid court to her daughter; and told everybody that “Sarah” was the best wife and mother in the world. “I am sure,” added Mrs. G., pathetically, “she makes a perfect slave of herself for her family.”

Slavery seemed to agree with Mrs. Bemmidge, who looked plump on her work. She was a woman of about the middle height, with dark-brown eyes, brown hair, a perfectly straight mouth, and a broad, fair forehead, with rather bustling manners, and a temper — I had better stop there, for George Geith saw only the face.

As for Mr. Foss, he seemed to be regarded as a perfect nonentity. A friend, Mrs. Bemmidge called him, and he certainly seemed to have all a friend's undesirable privileges conceded to him. He rang the bell, he was hustled into corners, he was sent errands, he played with the children, he was forgotten in the conversation, and made himself "quite at home," sitting in a direct draught.

He was a distant relation of Andrew Bemmidge, and had all the wine-merchant's natural modesty, sweetness of temper, and forgetfulness of himself.

Like the wine-merchant also, he could not see what was best for his domestic happiness, for he was over head and ears in love with Gertrude Gilling, and walked miles along the London pavements to fulfil her slightest behest.

"You found it cold, sir," said Mrs. Gilling, in her usual manner, only with the chill off.

"On the contrary, very warm," answered George; "but then, to be sure, I drove. I dare say the wind is cold to-day when walking. Have you been out?"

"Only to church," answered Mrs. Gilling, virtuously, and the accountant remembering what his friend had said on that head, let the subject drop.

"What a nice little place you have here, Bemmidge," he said; "I should scarcely have supposed that near London there had been a house so much in the country."

"Nothing but fields at the back," replied Mr. Bemmidge, while the ladies mentally repeated the word "little," and marvelled at what size of house Mr. Geith had been accustomed to visit. "Nothing but fields most part of the way to Hornsey; pretty neighbourhood;

beautiful walks about Highgate; the cemetery is well worth seeing. You must come down often in the summer time and explore the country."

Whereupon Mrs. Bemmidge at once expressed a hope that now Mr. Geith had found his way out to Holloway, he would make no stranger of himself, but come often and "take them as they were;" which could not be supposed to mean as they were then, seeing heaven and earth had been moved to put a good face on things in his honour.

George, in reply, stated his opinion that Mrs. Bemmidge was too kind, and Mrs. Bemmidge became duly satisfied that Mr. Geith was a delightful man.

That half-hour before dinner the accountant firmly believed never would end — not because he was hungry and wished for dinner, but because he was wearied to death of trying to find something to say.

The children had, indeed, promised a temporary diversion when they came in duly brushed, washed, and combed, to make the lives of all on whom they cast their affections, a weariness unto them. One little girl in especial, who had inquired pointedly, "Aint oo Mr. Rant?" seemed inclined to take him under her protection; but Mr. Foss presented such attractions as the children tried vainly to resist: pockets filled with presents — pockets that he let them turn inside out at their sweet will and pleasure — pockets from which halfpence might be abstracted, and sweetmeats procured.

To be sure, Mrs. Bemmidge exhibited the little girl aforementioned in every possible light; called the pert, ugly imp her "pretty queen," retailed all her stupid,

forward speeches, and kept the child in a grin at the repetition of her own wit.

"She said she was not to call you Mr. Rant any more, but Mr. Teeth," observed her mother. "Why did you call him Mr. Rant after all, dearie?"

In answer to which question Miss Bemmidge drew her shoulder completely out of her dress and rubbed herself sideways against her mother. A churn of a child the thing was, too, thicker round its waist than any other part of its body, and with the most astonishing pair of legs George Geith had ever beheld on a creature of its age.

"Just six last birthday," said Mrs. Bemmidge, with a triumphant smile, as though she were stating some fact greatly to the credit of her offspring.

"May I doo now, and 'peak to Harry, ma?" whispered the young lady, who could have spoken a great deal less like a two-year-old had she chosen; and mamma giving permission, she rushed over to Mr. Foss and claimed her share of the spoil.

"Oh! I declare, you've been and given Tommy a sugar-plum more than me," shrieked mamma's queen, and forthwith Mr. Foss had to make up the deficit.

"And your'n are bigger nor mine," said Tommy with his tongue out, all of which by-play Mr. Geith affected not to hear.

"We have one younger than any of them," remarked Mr. Bemmidge, who was accustomed to the juvenile concert. "Mamma, Mr. Geith has not seen baby."

"I am sure Mr. Geith does not want to see any more children until after dinner," answered Mrs. Bemmidge, which statement would have been perfectly

true, had she only added that he did not want to see any more children at all; but politeness prevented Mr. Geith acquiescing in her proposition, and so he declared that of all things he should like best to see the baby.

Straight away went the hostess to fetch her youngest born; and during her absence George racked his brains what to say to Mrs. Gilling. The theatres? Miss Gilling was so well up in them that his ignorance was exposed in a minute.

How the country looked at Christmas; how the old customs were still kept up in many a squire's house?

Mrs. Gilling knew nothing about the country; for her part she liked the gas and the shops; but Miss Gilling was enthusiastic concerning the snow on the tombstones; about frost on the evergreens; about the village choristers singing under the windows. Oh! better than anything on earth, Miss Gilling would like to spend a Christmas in a real old haunted house, where the olden fashions were observed.

"Had Mr. Geith ever spent a Christmas in the country?" and every hair on Miss Gilling's head seemed to quiver as she asked the question.

"Yes," he answered, "I have spent several Christmas days in the country."

"And in a baronial hall?" gasped Miss Gilling.

"In an old hall, at any rate," he replied laughing, "where Christmas was given every honour it deserves; and when we were all very happy because we were assembled together on the happiest day in the year."

"Oh! you will be contrasting that day with this," said Miss Gilling pathetically.

"Certainly not to the disadvantage of the present," was Mr. Geith's reply, at which Miss Gilling blushed

and simpered, whilst her mother smiled with the chill more off than ever.

At this juncture, in came the baby; and it may not be out of place here to state, that if there were one domestic animal, for which, more than another, Mr. Geith entertained a settled abhorrence, it was a baby — more particularly the kind of baby which now made its appearance — red in the face, blue in the arms, long in the legs, small in the eyes, and puckered about the mouth; a baby which cried without tears, and kicked without reason, and was, so said its mamma “the quietest little lamb that ever breathed.”

Long and weary had been George Geith's experience of babies. Never any part of his clerical duty had been so irksome to him as the christenings. The funeral service was nothing to the baptismal. He would rather have had to do with half a dozen corpses than one baby. He did not know how to hold them, how to quiet them, what in the name of wonder to do with them. His rector used to be able to nurse a child as cleverly as a good cook can turn a pancake; but he never could learn the trick; and so sure as he had a christening, so certainly there was weeping and wailing beside the font, dissatisfaction amongst the mothers, and muttered remarks that it was plain to be seen he was a bachelor.

And now here was another autocrat for him to serve and honour; another mass of jelly, provided with lungs, for him to essay to touch.

“A fine fellow, isn't he?” said the father, who really believed the child to be perfection.

“A darling, itzy witzzy pet,” capped mamma, handing the bundle of white cambric to Mr. Geith.

No, it did not cry; it just remained quiet long enough to get well into his arms, when it bent itself double, backwards, in order to get a good view of his face. Then its cheeks wrinkled, and with limbs drawn up, it screamed as though its last hour was come.

"Let mamma take it then, a darling. Shall mamma take it? Didn't it like strangers? there, there!" And Mrs. Bemmidge tried to pacify the wretch, and bore it off to its own especial apartment, whence George heard shrieks proceeding during the whole of dinner, which, much to his relief, was at last announced.

CHAPTER VI.

Pleasure.

It was a nice little party, only six. Mr. Bemmidge took charge of his mother-in-law, Mr. Foss of Miss Gilling, and Mr. Geith of Mrs. Bemmidge. A nice little party — at least, it would have been a convenient number had the children not swarmed after the adults into the dining-room, where they mounted high chairs, and surveyed the table from a vantage-ground.

Mrs. Gilling was good enough to say grace; perhaps because her son-in-law would not. George Geith had never dined at any man's table since the days when that ceremony was usually performed by him; and somehow Mrs. Gilling's grace struck him as the funniest thing about her.

For the sake of his friend, for the genuine liking he bore for that simple-hearted, honest man, who believed in his wife and his house, and who had not an

atom of humbug in his composition, the accountant strove to enjoy himself, and to eat and drink enough to satisfy his host.

But had he succeeded in this endeavour, he would certainly never have eaten and drank any more, for Mr. Bemmidge, not merely wanted him to taste everything that was on the table, but also to take two or three helpings of each dish, like Mrs. Gilling, whose appetite, it was satisfactory to see, had not been impaired by trouble. Of course it was not civil of George to notice such matters, but being a man who noticed everything, he could not avoid seeing that Mrs. Gilling did justice to the good fare set before her.

"She would trouble Andrew for sucking pig, because it was years since she had tasted one; and, as it was Christmas, she positively must have a slice of turkey. Goose was a thing dear Sarah knew she could relish if she was dying, and roast beef — well, if Mr. Geith would be so kind, it was an English dish, and it was as well to follow old customs." So the lady rambled about whilst the children ate stuffing, and spilt gravy, and messed their pinafores, and their father employed his time in alternately scolding and giving them titbits.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Geith, that we have nothing you like," said Mrs. Bemmidge plaintively, after she had vainly pressed Mr. Geith to take a little more, "if it was only a morsel of beef."

"Nothing I like!" repeated George. "I assure you, Mrs. Bemmidge, I have not eaten such a dinner for seven years."

"Then I wonder you are alive," remarked the lady, as she helped her mother to turkey again.

"Tommy, do sit up; Andrew, keep your fingers out of the gravy; papa, do not let Amy have any more; Harry, if you don't behave yourself you shall not taste the pudding," and so forth; the courtesies of life being blended with a strict attention to its duties.

"What am I to do with it?" thought George Geith, as he had about a pound of plum pudding set before him, with an intimation from Mrs. Bemmidge that it was a triumph of her own culinary skill. And the accountant longed for the days of his youth, when he had a knack of secreting pieces of fat and other unsavoury viands, unknown by mortal man. "If I could but leave it?" he sighed; but no, there it was to be finished, and by him.

Mrs. Bemmidge would hear of no smaller portion; and, indeed, in comparison to his, that allotted to Mrs. Gilling was a very Benjamin's.

"I am quite sure, Sarah, those children will make themselves ill," said their grandmother, as Miss Bemmidge slyly put forth her hand to secure another mince pie.

"You naughty girl, how dare you?" said mamma to her queen. "Papa, push her chair from the table. I suppose it is because Mr. Geith is here, she thinks she may do as she likes. Mr. Geith, have you found the ring? There is a ring in the pudding. I hope you will get it; I shall be so pleased."

"Perhaps, Mrs. Bemmidge, you have taken care I shall get it," answered George, with a ghastly attempt at a smile, as he still worked his way through the mass before him.

"Oh no! it was fairly mixed, I assure you," broke in Miss Gilling; "my sister dropped in the ring, and

we all stirred the pudding after that. Even Andrew ventured into the kitchen to do his part," which was the less to be wondered at, perhaps, I may add, as Andrew had very often to venture into the kitchen in search of his boots.

"And supposing I do find the ring," said George, "what will be the consequence?"

"Why, you will be married before the year is out," answered Mrs. Bemmidge, with a simper.

"Then I shall certainly not continue the search," exclaimed the accountant, laying down his spoon.

"Oh! but that is not fair," cried Mrs. Bemmidge. "You must finish your pudding. And, besides, it is my guard ring, and I cannot have it lost."

"I never willingly put myself in the way of misfortune," said Mr. Geith, solemnly.

"Only hear him," exclaimed Mrs. Gilling, with her mouth full of plums.

"I hope, ring or no ring, you will be married by this time next year," said Mr. Bemmidge, "for a man never knows what true comfort and happiness is till he has a wife to take care of him."

"You speak from a fortunate experience," answered Mr. Geith. "If all marriages were as happy as yours —" and the hypocrite turned to Mrs. Bemmidge, and the young olive-branches round the table, who were by this time busy with his plate, looking out "mamma's ring," and quarrelling for the candied lemon.

Suddenly there came a little scream from Miss Gilling — she had nearly swallowed the ring.

"Gerty's got it! Gerty's got it!" cried parents and children in chorus.

"We may hope, then," said George, "to meet together again before next Christmas on a different occasion. "That is," he added, "if I may be allowed the honour of being present."

But at this point Miss Gilling's confusion and blushes became so painful that Mrs. Bemmidge desired Amy to ring the bell. "If you *won't* have a mince pie, Mr. Geith," she said, quite piteously.

"You really must excuse me," he replied. And then the servant came, and went through a ceremony that Mrs. Bemmidge called "clearing away;" after which Mrs. Gilling again officiated, and dessert was placed on the table.

"May I stay with papa and Mr. Teeth, mamma?" asked Amy, when the ladies rose to depart.

"Yes, if you are good," said mamma; and Miss Bemmidge, and consequently the boys, remained.

Certainly, if the condition mentioned in her mother's speech had been enforced, the young lady would have been summarily expelled from the apartment. So long as the quartet could get Mr. Foss to supply them with fruit they remained preternaturally quiet; but when even Mr. Foss thought they had made sufficient inroads on the oranges and walnuts, Miss Bemmidge commenced to be dictatorial towards her brothers, and so aggravated Tommy that he pushed her off her chair, for which offence he was ejected from the delights of after-dinner chat, and sent in disgrace to his mother.

"You smoke, I know, Geith," said Mr. Bemmidge; and thereupon Amy rushed away for the cigar-case, procured matches, and made herself busy, getting a saucer to hold the ashes.

"That is my useful little girl," remarked Mr. Bemmidge. "I wonder if she could eat an orange." Whereupon Amy put her finger in her mouth, and looked as if she never had dexterously appropriated an orange in her life.

After that, she climbed on the knees of all the gentlemen in succession, and reversing the position of Mr. Foss's cigar when it lay on the table, had the inexpressible satisfaction of seeing him put the hot end in his mouth.

Shrieks of laughter from Andrew and Henry, however, exposed the culprit, and Miss Amy, together with her brothers, was shown the door by her father, who remarked apologetically to his cousin, that "children would be children."

Whether Mr. Foss found the aphorism cool his mouth, I cannot say; but it is certain he declined further smoking for that night.

It was all very well talking to Mr. Bemmidge and Mr. Foss when the children were away. Of course the conversation turned on business topics, but business was a topic George Geith liked.

The mysteries of the wine trade were unveiled for the visitor's edification. The adulteration, tricks, the doctoring, were all duly discussed over — shall I write it reader? — brandy-and-water. Mr. Bemmidge talked about Messrs. Reuben and Issachar, "who had been exchequered for eighty thousand, and paid the fine," said Mr. Bemmidge, taking the cigar out of his mouth, "with a cheque. They were exchequered," he went on, "for filling barrels with water, and shipping them as brandy, in order to get the drawback. They managed, by fitting a tin tube to the bung-hole, to

enable the Custom-house officer to taste the very finest brandy. How much they made nobody ever knew," added Mr. Bemmidge, "nor how much they might have made, but for a row with one of their men, who informed against them."

Then there were Cripple, Holt and Sons, who ran their spirit off through the streets; beside gas-pipes and water-pipes, through houses, stables, and warehouses, and only paid duty on about a third they made.

Further there was Mr. Briggs, who sold thousands of pipes of wine, and yet still, who scarcely ever took a single pipe out of bond. "He made it all — heaven only knows how," said Mr. Bemmidge, regretfully; "and the secret died with him. I could not have told his wine from the best Portuguese; and, indeed nobody could, if the wine would have kept. But it would not. It mildewed in a month. The firm sold it forty shillings a dozen, and twenty to the trade. And didn't the trade push it — only trust them!"

So the talk went on till it was time to join the ladies, who were seated in the drawing-room, all domestic arrangements over, waiting for the evening guests, who arrived in due season, attired in dresses that were certainly very gay, determined to enjoy themselves and make Christmas-day a merry one indeed.

Can you picture the evening, my reader? The tea, handed round by awkward, yet gallant cavaliers, who upset the cups, trampled on the ladies' dresses, and made funny little speeches that kept the company in a roar. The card-tables, where whist was played for six-penny stakes, and old ladies appropriated George Geith's

winnings with an activity which it was cheering to remark in persons of their age —

The dancing, for which Mrs. Bemmidge played Sir Roger de Coverley, Hertz quadrilles, and Scotch reels —

The games, mistakes in which entailed forfeits, and forfeits involved a young gentleman seeking about for the prettiest girl in the room to kiss; a young lady standing in the corner and remarking —

Here I stand as stiff as a stake —

Who'll come and release me for charity's sake ?

Upon hearing which pathetic appeal a rush was usually made towards the spot she occupied. This person was to eat three inches off the poker; that, to compose a verse of poetry, and another to dance a minuet with the tongs. There was "Blind man's buff," in which game Miss Gilling caught Mr. Geith, and exclaiming, "I have got you at last, Mr. Jones," blushed becomingly when she discovered her mistake. "If it was a mistake," whispered Mrs. Jones, nudging her neighbour Mrs. Thomas.

And the singing after supper! The comic songs, at which George laughed as he had not laughed before since he was a boy, not because of any especial comicality in the songs, but because of the intense funniness of the singers. The sentimental ditties, emanating chiefly from the ladies, that were all pitched somewhere about F sharp, and went up into screams from thence. To say nothing of Mrs. Bemmidge, who, being too shy to favour the company, was yet overpowered by numbers, and induced at length to break forth into melody.

It was impossible she could sing, however, if people looked at her; so, to obviate this difficulty, she turned her chair round, and sat with her back to the table, in which position she delighted her guests with the account of a lady —

“Who left her home
To fly with a Chris-ti-an knight.”

When that was finished, her sister followed with “Love not,” which performance Mr. Foss immediately capped with “Love on,” — a song which was rapturously encored by all the young men and married ladies of the party.

After supper, more forfeits, more dancing, and louder and faster revelry, that reminded George Geith of the sounds that used to be borne to his ear when he kept solitary state in furnished apartments.

“Things went off capitally,” Mrs. Bemmidge said to her mother when the door closed behind the last batch of departing guests, “and I am sure Mr. Geith enjoyed himself.”

“If he did not, he ought to,” remarked Mrs. Gilling, in a tone of the liveliest conviction; albeit her voice was a little thick.

Meantime George Geith was walking with a splitting head-ache through the deserted City streets.

“If that be pleasure,” he ungratefully soliloquized as he entered Fen Court, where the graveyard looked ghastly in the grey morning light — “If that be pleasure, give me work.”

CHAPTER VII.

A Little Cool.

IF Miss Gilling had known what memories she was awakening when she talked so prettily about snow on the tombstones, and villagers singing Christmas hymns, it is more than probable she would have avoided the subject of Christmas altogether and contented herself with some remarks on the virtues of her sister's children, and the peculiar severity of those rheumatic attacks to which her mamma was subject in damp weather.

But all unconsciously she had raised a legion of old associations; associations so linked and interwoven with George Geith's best and happiest past, that, spite of all his efforts, he could not rest content till — now that he was free to go where and when he listed — he had revisited Morelands and seen the friends who dwelt there.

The more he thought about Morelands, the greater grew his longing to see the old place once again. He contrasted Morelands with Holloway — Cissy Hayles with Gertrude Gilling — till he felt he must see the Hayleses and the Chiltern Hills once more.

A sickening desire to get away from streets and houses; from business acquaintances and the treadmill of his daily life, came suddenly over the man; and though he could ill spare a day at that season of the year, he still determined to take a run into the country, and see if it had changed as he had changed, or whether it would still bear the same face for him that it had done in days departed.

He could go by rail to Dunstable, and walk from thence over the downs to Morelands. Mr. and Mrs. Hayles, he used to say, were like his parents; the girls as thoughtful and kind as sisters; whilst, as for Cissy, of course that pretty creature, with her winning ways and many accomplishments, could be Cissy Hayles no longer, but must have been transformed into the wife of some rich man, who made her happy — George Geith hoped —

And at this point he sighed. Cissy had certainly been very fond of him, poor girl; and if he had chanced to be differently situated, who knew? He might never have left Morelands, but remained there, and married Cissy himself. As it was, so it was, and, no doubt, all for the best. He was an accountant, and Cissy, most probably, a happy wife. At any rate, he trusted he should hear she was, when he paid his visit to the ivy-covered rectory, which he had once been as free to enter as though it had been his own home.

Having thought over all which topics, George Geith told his clerk, one morning, early in the new year, that he should not return before night, and started off on his expedition, looking twice as old as the curate who had fled from that easy country life more than seven years before.

It was nearly eight years, in point of fact, though, as he travelled the well-known paths, he found it hard to realize that so long a period had elapsed.

Time in London flies. Day hurries after day; spring, summer, autumn, winter come and go — come and go with a rapidity frightful to think of. The hours may appear long, because of the monotony of the work that fills them; but the week always seems,

in looking back upon it, like half a one; and Sunday, in the city, falls about where Wednesday or Thursday might, far away in the country.

It is express pace there, year after year, we travel the miles of our threescore-and-ten pilgrimage, but they seem short because of the speed at which we go; and if we want to feel that our days are not flitting away so fast that we cannot count their flight, we must go into the country, where time travels by slow stages, and the ordinary span of human life lengthens its apparent duration to about a hundred and fifty years.

Eighteen months in Morelands — eight years in London! Looking back, it seemed to George that he had resided for eighteen years in Morelands, and eight months in London.

There was nothing, either, in the aspect of the country by which he was surrounded, to assist him in realizing the length of time that had elapsed since he walked across those fields before. To his left, the Downs stretched away green and monotonous as ever; to his right, the arable and pasture land was divided into about the same proportion as formerly.

Here and there a church-tower, a few trees, a little cluster of houses, reminded him of the situation of this, or that village; but there were no new houses, no modern mansions, no strange factories, nothing but what he had been familiar with years previously.

Above all, there was no town; and, looking about him and remarking this, George Geith thanked God there was country enough left to last him his lifetime.

It was still early in the day, and, as he did not wish to reach the rectory before two o'clock, he di-

verged a little from the path, and striking into a by-road — one of those unfenced, unhedged roads, which are peculiar to that part of Bedfordshire — he walked on and on, till he gained the top of the hill.

Once there, he looked about him for a seat, and taking possession of a large stone lying by the wayside he repeated his previous thanksgiving.

Miles without houses; far as he could see without a town! He was very happy to be alone with nature for a while, — to be out of the roar and bustle of London, even for a few hours.

He took off his hat and let the north wind blow about his head. He sat there with hands clasped before him perfectly still and very happy. For years he had never felt so happy before; the great silence around seemed to lay a soothing touch on his heart, the great expanse of country filled and satisfied his soul.

All at once years and years seemed to be struck off his life, and he was young again. At the moment he understood the physical enjoyment some people feel in the mere sensation of living, without having any specific object to live for, which had often before puzzled him.

Seated on the top of the hill, with the wind blowing crisp and cool on his temples, George Geith felt that "to be" utterly independent of "to have" was an unspeakable boon and blessing.

It was well to have toiled and worked, and been a prisoner, if but to feel this satisfaction and happiness.

It was worth being mewed up in a town in order

to understand the majesty and beauty of God's handiwork.

Wheresoever they would, he let his eyes roam — now into the valley he had just left, and again over the country lying on the other side of the hill where he sat.

He followed the distant trains as the engines went puffing along their respective lines; he skirted the Chiltern Hills till he descried the distant woods of Snareham Castle.

Far below him, were churches with little hamlets gathered around them, and each church he saw had a tower and a flat roof like that at Great Snareham, which, though he had relinquished the living, still belonged to his family.

By degrees he looked less at the other points of the landscape, and more at the Snareham woods.

They lay miles and miles from him on the hill side, but still he could see them standing dark and bare against the wintry sky.

Was Lady Geith at the Castle, he marvelled? was Mark married? was his uncle Arthur living? What change had the years brought to them? "Mark must be eight-and-twenty now," he reflected. "How the time has flown!"

It had flown even whilst he remained sitting there, and he was about to turn his face down the hill again when he saw, mounting its crest, and then coming tearing along the table-land at top, a great black horse, which flung out its feet at the rate of twelve miles an hour, and dragged a well-appointed dog-cart, containing a gentleman and his groom, as easily as though the whole turn-out did not weigh half a hundred.

Idly, as holiday-makers always look upon fresh incidents of any kind, George Geith watched the carriage come spinning on.

"A good whip and a good horse," he thought, and next instant he cried out to the former, "The throat-piece is loose."

"What do you say?" asked the driver, pulling up so suddenly that he almost brought the horse on his haunches.

"Your throat-piece is loose," repeated George, and he got up to buckle it, an attention which the horse resented by rising on his hind legs.

"Don't touch him; stand clear, will you; d— it, are you tired of your life?" thundered the owner, but George held his ground and brought the animal down again.

"Be quiet, you brute," he said, keeping a grip on the bridle with one hand, while he vainly tried to fasten the band with the other; but in the meantime the servant came to the rescue, and looking at his livery, George saw he had the Geith crest on his buttons. From the man he turned to the master, and behold! the master was his cousin Mark.

"You are a cool hand," remarked that gentleman, with a certain admiration, "you must be devilishly well accustomed to horses."

"It is many a year since I had anything to do with them," was the reply, and the two men stared at each other for a moment. Then, "Mark, don't you know me?"

"By Jove! it's George," burst from them simultaneously, and the pair grasped hands.

"What were you doing here?" asked the baronet.

"Resting myself," answered the accountant.

"Where are you bound for?"

"Morelands; I have a couple of hours to spare, and want to see the Hayleses."

"Now, that is odd," cried Sir Mark; "I have just left the rectory. I will drive you back — jump in!" And without more ado the young man turned his horse's head round in the direction of Morelands.

"Now, don't do that," pleaded George, "I should like the walk, and I shall not give you the trouble."

"Hang the trouble!" said Sir Mark; "jump in;" and thus exhorted, his cousin obeyed, the man sprang on behind, and away they went down the hill and across the valley at a pace which brought them to the rectory gates in less than twenty minutes.

"This will be a surprise," exclaimed Sir Mark, as they flew round the drive. "*Entre nous*, do you think Paterfamilias will be glad to see you?"

"I do not know why he should not," answered the accountant; "do you?"

"No," was the reply, "but I opine that absence has not made his heart grow fonder, so do not be disappointed. Forewarned, you know," finished Sir Mark, as he preceded his cousin through the open door and walked across the hall with a freedom, not to say familiarity, which astonished the *ci-devant* curate not a little.

"I found an old friend of yours on the hills, and brought him to see you, Mrs. Hayles," said the baronet, as he entered the room where Mrs. Hayles and her daughters were engaged in such light occupation as befitted the room and the hour. "You do not seem to

remember him; allow me to introduce my cousin, the Rev. George Geith.

As a hen ruffles up her plumage, and backs into the nearest corner, when any enemy approaches her brood, so Mrs. Hayles, at sight of the unclerical figure thus presented, shook out her maternal feathers, and prepared to do battle in behalf of the innocent children surrounding her.

She was awkwardly placed — between the Scylla of Sir Mark, whom she did not wish to offend, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of George, whom she did not wish to encourage, on the other.

But Mrs. Hayles was equal to the occasion; she froze her visitor by civility. She iced the waters of her conversation, and then gave him nice looking, yet chilly fragments for his refreshment.

“So glad to see him; so good of him to call; where had he been hiding himself? Sophy, run and tell papa Mr. Geith has called to see him.”

Meantime the young ladies were iced likewise, only without their mamma’s civility. All except Cissy, who was Miss Hayles still, and who came forward with the old sweet smile, and the old charm of manner, to tell Mr. Geith how delighted she was, his cousin had brought him to see them. “But surely,” she added, “you would have come of yourself, if within twenty miles of us?” and the soft blue eyes were raised to his for a moment as the beauty spoke.

“Come! of course he would,” said Mrs. Hayles, with a slight frown directed towards her daughter, which did not escape the visitor’s notice. “And where have you been all this time, Mr. Geith; and are we to congratulate you on an excellent living?”

"If you will be so kind," answered the accountant, "I have fallen into an excellent living — out of the Church."

"Do you mean —," inquired the lady.

"That I have relinquished the Church? Yes. I am in business in London."

"You are not serious?" Mrs. Hayles was very much in earnest as she asked the question.

"I am indeed," was the reply; "I have been in business ever since I left Morelands."

"How sorry Mr. Hayles will be," opined his wife. "Such a pity, such talents, such advantages, such an opening!" and Mrs. Hayles complacently folded her white hands and sighed.

"But if Mr. Geith be doing well, mamma," interposed Cissy.

"My love, I am surprised at you," said mamma, "for a man who has once entered the Church to relinquish her service so lightly —"

"I assure you," interrupted George, "I was driven from the Church by a stern necessity. I did not quit her service voluntarily, but having left it, I should neither be able nor wishful to re-enter my old sphere of labour."

"The Snareham patriarch is still alive," here broke in Sir Mark, "and the living is yours, George, remember, whenever he goes. It belongs to nobody else, so long as you like to take it."

"But Mr. Geith could not take it now," said Mrs. Hayles, very softly. "Surely if it be impossible for a layman to serve both God and Mammon, it would be something more than impossible for a clergyman to

do so — and soiled as Mr. Geith's cloth is with contact with the world —”

“Contact with nonsense!” retorted Sir Mark — “that is, Mrs. Hayles; I did not mean it; I really am very sorry; I beg your pardon, I thought I was talking to George. What I meant to say was this, George is not soiled. He won't serve God and Mammon; he will only take Snareham and stick to it till something better offers. He will make as good a parson now as ever, and preach as good a sermon, and I can only repeat that Great Snareham is very heartily at his service; and I am very glad to have an opportunity of telling him so.”

“Thank you, Mark,” answered his cousin, “but it may not be. I have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and can never more return to a state of innocence, believing a curate's life to be a desirable one, and four hundred a year a meed of wealth wherewith to be content. I am very much obliged for your great kindness, but I shall not ask you for Great Snareham, for I cannot re-enter the Church.”

“How grieved Mr. Hayles will be,” reiterated Mrs. Hayles.

“I hope he will not grieve on my account,” said George, smiling in spite of himself; “for I am doing very well indeed, and no one ought to know better than Mr. Hayles, that every man who leaves the Church, throws an extra chance in the way of those who remain.”

At which remark, Sir Mark, seizing a convenient opportunity, winked at his cousin.

It was not, perhaps, gentlemanly, but it conveyed to George the correct impression that Sir Mark knew

the lady wanted to have the living of Great Snareham for her husband, and that, ironically, he hoped she might get it.

"I shall keep the living for you, George," said the baronet determinedly. "And if you do not like it when it falls in, I shall give it to some one to nurse till you change your mind."

"You have not lunched, Mr. Geith, I am sure," exclaimed Mrs. Hayles, who had heard enough of Great Snareham, and was desirous of shifting her ground. "Maud, ring the bell. Cissy, see what Sophy is doing, and whether she can find your papa."

"Let me go," said that easy friend of the family, Sir Mark Geith; and though Mrs. Hayles declared she could not think of troubling him, he was so kind as to accompany Cissy on her rambles, whether with the intention of finding papa, or having a moment's *tête-à-tête*, George did not know, and did not much care, for everything in the old rectory was changed for him, and the people who lived there were his friends, his dear familiar friends, no more.

Meantime Maud stood with her hand on the bell-rope, a fair white hand, which the accountant noticed, as he assured her mamma that he had lunched — that he had only a few minutes longer to stay.

"We dine at five, Mr. Geith, and we really cannot let you run away in this manner, after so long an absence."

"You are very kind, but I must get back to town."

"Well, a glass of wine at any rate."

Here Maud made a feint of grasping the rope, and

George Geith watched her pantomime of bell-ringing with some interest.

How well he remembered Maud, as a child, with her broad-brimmed straw hat, with her streaming curls, and her quiet, decorous manners. A child who was almost too shy to say "thank you" freely to a stranger, and who had yet developed into this calm, self-possessed young lady, whom George looked at till he wondered.

"I never take wine in the middle of the day," he said, even whilst he was marvelling at the changes a few years had wrought.

"Mr. Hayles will scold me, I know," said the lady in a tone of deep distress, for she was beginning to think she had iced her manner too much, and that George saw through her a little too well. "Maud, ring the bell; we will have lunch brought up at any rate." And Maud did ring, for she saw her mother was at last in earnest.

"I beg," entreated the visitor, "that you will not order any lunch for me. I really must get back to the station at once. I had but a short time to spare, but being in the neighbourhood I thought I could not pass your door."

"It was so kind — so like you. Oh! here is Mr. Hayles." And the rector's lady breathed a sigh of relief as her husband, accompanied by Sophy, and Cissy, and Sir Mark, entered the apartment.

Mr. Hayles was a grey-haired man, who seemed oppressed by the size of his family — the ever increasing gentility of his wife, and the smallness of his income; but he was more honest than Mrs. Hayles, inasmuch, as that while he shook hands with his old

curate heartily, and hoped he was well and doing well, he still did not express any pleasure at his visit, nor request him to prolong it.

As, however, "using hospitality without grudging," to all men, had always been one of the rector's sins most grievous in his wife's eyes, he did urge Mr. Geith to have something to eat before he departed; and in this he was seconded by Cissy, who, spite of the thunderstorm gathering on the maternal brow, prayed him to stop for another half-hour at any rate. "It was so long since they had seen him — such years and years!"

She looked very pretty as she begged him to stay. She was the same winning, stealing, twining Cissy, George Geith remembered walking with through the rectory gardens in the old days departed, when such close intimacy was dangerous and trying to both.

But he was not to be taken in with blue eyes and soft words and sunshiny smiles now. He had seen her smile on Mark, in just the same manner, and he knew her at last for what she was — a natural woman it might be, but still a woman naturally a flirt.

"It is all grist that comes to her mill," thought George, "and I won't be ground up in it;" which was a very prudent resolve, more especially as — God help her — Cissy Hayles had loved, and did love, George Geith more than she was ever likely to love any man again.

More, most certainly, than she ever could care for Sir Mark, who had few brains, few talents, and indulged in profane swearing to an extent which scandalised the rector.

She had tried hard to win him; she was trying

harder to keep him; for a baronet and the great Geith estates, and a good marriage settlement were things to be desired by a poor parson's daughter.

"It will be rest for your father, the making of your sisters, and position for yourself." This was how Mrs. Hayles lashed on the willing horse whenever it faltered for a moment.

The match would, probably, accomplish all Mrs. Hayles said, and Cissy did her best to bring it about; but for all that, she could not help liking the one cousin better than the other, and when George thought she was acting, she was as much in earnest as ever she was in her life.

Having the baronet in tow, she would not have married the accountant, even had he been a clergyman again, and the rector of Great Snareham to boot; but in any capacity she would have flirted with him, and for this reason it was fortunate that Mr. Geith fortified himself against her artillery.

It may have been also for this reason that Mr. Hayles asked his visitor to spare him a few moments before he left.

Once in his study, the rector shut the door and said, "More than seven years ago, Mr. Geith, when you left Morelands and the Church together, you told me a painful reason was driving you from both. Within six months after, I knew what that reason was."

It took a great deal to move George Geith's composure, but his face changed as Mr. Hayles spoke.

"I do not pretend to judge you," the clergyman went on, speaking evidently with an effort. "I do not say how far you were sinned against, how far you

erred yourself. I only know I am sorry for you now, as I was sorry for you then. But — you came to this house under false colours; you were received by us as we never could have received you, had we known your true position. Was it right for you to deceive me, Mr. Geith? I only ask you, was it right?"

"It was not," George answered, "but I meant no harm. If I had thought my silence could do harm to you or yours, I should have gone away long before I did."

"You mixed familiarly with our girls," continued the rector, "you who could never have married one of them. I do not want to say more; will you finish my sentence for yourself?"

"Yes," George Geith answered, "I will. You want to know why, as I ought never to have entered your house in the past, I have come to it in the present; and I repeat I meant no harm to any one. I came, remembering all your former kindness to me, and wishful to prove I was not ungrateful for it. But I will come no more. That is what you want me to promise, Mr. Hayles; and I give you my word this is the last time I will ever cross your threshold, unless you tell me I can benefit you or yours in some way by doing so. Now let me ask you one question. Does Mrs. Hayles, or my cousin Mark, know why I left here?"

"I forgive you the doubt," answered the rector, "for I know how it has arisen. I never told your trouble to any one, and I never shall. I did say to my wife, I regretted we had suffered such close intimacy with the girls as I feared you were by no means a desirable acquaintance for them. You could

not blame me for that precaution, because I did not know when or where, or how, they and you might meet again."

There was a moment's silence, and then George Geith held out his hand in farewell.

Never a man had the rector liked so well since they parted; and as he looked in the worn face, at the brown hair sprinkled with grey, at the eyes sunken with want of rest and incessant mental labour, his heart smote him for the words he had spoken, and his voice shook a little, while he begged his visitor not to think he had been over harsh.

"No, Mr. Hayles, I can never think anything but good of *you*," answered George, muttering a secret malediction at the same time against the rector's wife.

"And are you doing well? Can I assist you in any way? If I can, let me know. There is nothing I would not do for you, except ask you here; and that I could not, you know."

There was something very touching in the way the old clergyman said this.

Remembering all things, his visitor marvelled he was so lenient, and for a minute felt tempted to tell him he was working for freedom no longer.

But he put aside the impulse, and merely promising to apply to Mr. Hayles should he ever stand in need of his assistance, wrung the hand extended to him, and left the room.

Whilst he was saying good-bye to Mrs. Hayles and her daughters, the rector stood on the doorstep, waiting to see the last of the man he once hoped to have called his son.

Sir Mark and Mr. Geith came out together.

"If you will not go to Snareham, let me at least drop you at the station," the former was entreating, and as nothing could be urged against this proposal, George took his place in the dog-cart, while the baronet lifted the reins.

Then once again Mr. Hayles held out his hand — coming quite close to the wheel, so that his old curate might reach it. "Good-bye — God bless you," he said, but before any answer could be returned, the black fiend was off; and as they swept round the drive, the high laurels and thick shrubs shut out the sight of Morelands Rectory from George Geith's eyes for ever!

CHAPTER VIII.

All on One Side.

"TAKE the reins for a minute, will you?" said Sir Mark to his cousin, when they were once more on the open road. "I want a cigar. I shan't offer you one, old fellow," he went on, as he opened his case, "because I know you have tasted nothing since you left London. All your fibs to mother Hayles did not impose on me. Queer old girl, isn't she?"

"I think she is greatly changed, and not improved," answered George.

"Changed! not a bit of it," said the baronet, scornfully. "People don't change, they only develop; and the old lady is so cock-a-hoop about marrying one of her girls to a baronet, that she does not know what to do with herself. Should you like to drive? If you would, go ahead."

"Thank you, I had much rather you managed your brute for yourself. He has nearly pulled my arms off as it is."

"A trifle hard in the mouth, perhaps," said Sir Mark, as he resumed the reins; "but his only fault."

"I should not have thought it," answered the accountant, drily; "for I have seen him rear, shy, and plunge, and I observe he requires a tidy kicking strap in addition."

"He will take us to Snareham though, within the hour," answered the other.

"He won't take me, thank you, Mark," was the reply; "for I must get back to London."

"So you shall, my boy; but come and dine with me first. Then, if you won't stay longer, you shall catch the up express at the junction. There is nobody at the castle but myself. My mother and the old cat are in town, and have been there for the last three months; now, don't refuse; I am bored to death, and have lots to tell you. Besides, the drive will do you good. Do you not feel as if the wind were blowing life into you?"

"Yes," answered George. "It is almost life to a man, who has scarcely set foot out of London all these years."

And he looked round him as he spoke. What a difference between the two lots! between that of the possible heir, and that of the certain possessor.

Driving a horse which knew but one pace, namely, as hard as he could tear along the clear country road, might not seem an occupation to desire, nor the animal's owner a person to envy; but the leisure and the wealth which left it free to the one man to go where he

liked, when he liked, as he liked, seemed for the moment amazing to the other, who had been working on the business treadmill for years.

Just then pleasure seemed a very pleasant thing to the busy man. He had never known what it was to be idle all his days. He had been reading, learning, studying, preaching, visiting, and afterwards poring over ledgers and balance-sheets since boyhood till then; and with that keen relish which fasting from any indulgence induces, he devoured the sensational delight of the present, and fancied all moments must be as sweet to his cousin, as that to him.

And indeed Sir Mark Geith was apparently fortunate enough, young enough, and happy enough to be regarded with something like envy.

Just twenty-eight, in the prime of health and strength, with high animal spirits, and every capacity for taking enjoyment out of his surroundings, the baronet was driving home to Snareham Castle, possessed of a fine estate and a good rent-roll wherewith to keep up the dignity of an old and honoured name.

There were no skeletons in his cupboard, unless indeed, it might be the old cat so spitefully referred to by him. He was free from all ties; the world lay before him as it lay before George, but it was a very different world through which he had to travel.

Looking down at the woods which surrounded Mark's home, and contrasting the free hill-side, and the breezy downs, and the pure, fresh air which he drank in, as a fainting man might wine, with Fen Court and its churchyard, and its never-ending, always commencing round of work, George Geith felt that his cousin was

a person to be envied, and that he should like to be standing in his shoes.

But next moment he put aside the thought. Should he, to whom God had given the capacity for work, repine because God had not permitted him to remain idle? Should he who could win wealth, and be proud of winning it with the strength of his own arm, lament because a good life stood between him and this unearned hoard? Should he be disloyal to the man who was pressing hospitality on him, and who had been so like his brother in days gone by that, at Snareham Castle, strangers were at a loss to decide which was the prospective baronet, and which the country clergyman's landless son?

Spite of his weary struggles — ay, even because of them — he would be loyal to his cousin, true to himself; and with this better feeling, there mingled another reason for his contentment. Over and above that strange sense of personal possession which a man feels in himself, and which makes him know he would rather lie down in the grave in his own flesh and blood than return to life and take another's form and soul instead, George Geith was conscious of a mental superiority over his cousin, which he would not have relinquished for ten times his cousin's wealth. Brains, Mark had none; he had the usual amount of conversational ability with which most young men are gifted — rather a greater amount indeed, because his speech was perfectly unaffected and natural; but he had no talents, no genius of any kind, and George Geith knew this.

If both men had started fairly together in the race, without any favour shown to either, Mark would never

have reached the winning-post at all, while George was almost sure to do so.

Looking at his cousin, therefore, he felt somewhat as a prizefighter might, if contemplating an effeminate stripling in armour:

"Were we stripped to the skin," thinks the giant, "I would show you in two minutes which is the better man."

Wealth and rank were Mark Geith's armour; they are the breastplate and helmet which the world so often mistakes for strength.

Have you, reader, ever thought what it must be for a man to achieve social success in his shirt-sleeves? with what brawny arms and muscles of iron he must have fought out his long fight. If business men are sometimes over-proud of their achievements, it seems to me the aristocracy might be more lenient towards them for this reason, viz., that mind, and body, and spirit have been often weary with the conflict; that men and circumstances, and prejudices were all against them, as they toiled onward to success.

Yet they have their balance oftentimes, too; the sure support afforded by an inner consciousness of power.

The poodle yelping from the carriage-window is a genteeler animal than the unwashed, unkempt, half-starved mastiff stalking along the pavement; and yet still, if I mistake not the faces of dogs, the mastiff has a contempt for the poodle, and is marvelling how it would look, wandering through the streets, wading through mire, and mud, and filth.

"Come down to our level, ye sneerers," shouts Business. "Come from chambers of pleasure, from couches

of ease, from servants, equipages, and bankers' balances to our level, where we will fight it out till we see if you despise us still."

And then, when Pleasure refuses the challenge, Business climbs desperately up the hill, on the summit whereof lie the fair lands where the idlers dwell, and, repeating its challenge, is laughed to scorn.

For in those fair lands it is wealth, and rank, and grace, and manner that carry the day; while down below it is something far different — something not to be acquired by art, or inherited from man, which shall win the palm; but strength, and energy, and patience, and prudence, and brains — all gifts direct from God, that bring a man safe through the fiercest war which civilization permits.

And should George Geith wish to change his pure gold for the gilding he beheld beautifying his cousin?

Scarcely, I think; though he was but dimly conscious of the extent of his own possessions. Scarcely, though he sighed when the woods surrounding Snareham Castle lay spread once more before him. No; he would not change his own identity, and he would not covet his cousin's goods. For all which reasons he was content, being himself, to be still a far-off heir, down amongst the rabble, fighting for his life.

As some such thoughts were floating through George Geith's mind, Sir Mark pointed with his whip to the old tower of Great Snareham Church as he said,

"I shall never give it to anybody but you while Mr. Hetton lives; and, if you like, I will appoint you private chaplain till he dies."

"You are very good, Mark," was the reply; "but I shall never preach again."

"I don't want you to preach, man," retorted his cousin. "Heaven knows, I have listened to too many sermons from my mother and madam to wish to hear any more; but I do want you to wear a black coat and white cravat, and say grace for me at the castle. If you would only stay where I could lay my hand on you at any time, I would give you a couple or three hundred a-year for sitting in the chimney corner."

"A chimney corner life would never suit me," answered the accountant. "I have worked too long and too hard, since I saw you last, ever to rest content again with light employment and light pay. I never did a better thing for myself than when I left the Church. I was not adapted for a clergyman, and I have now found out what I am fitted for."

"A pushing shopkeeper," suggested Sir Mark.

"I would rather be that than a dependent parson, kicking my heels at a great man's door," retorted his cousin.

"You needn't be so sharp about the matter, damn it," observed Sir Mark. "I did not mean to annoy you; and if you think it an insult to have a living pressed upon you, I know somebody who would jump at it. What fun it is to watch Mrs. Hayles nibbling after the piece of preferment. She watches Great Snareham as a cat might a larder door."

"But will you not give it to her husband?" asked George.

"I tell you the living is yours," said the baronet, "and if it were not yours I should not give it to Mr. Hayles. He is a good man; but I have my reasons, and he shall never have Great Snareham while I have

the giving of it. But now we are at the old place again; tell me if you think it improved?"

George looked about him. Through the trees that bordered the drive he could see belts of young planting stretching away in the distance. He perceived that the deer park, once so rough and neglected, was now kept smooth as a bowling green; that the steep grassy bank, under the castle windows, was converted into terraces; and that below the terraces lay a pleasure-garden.

Within the court-yard, which he could remember grass-grown and comfortless, there was another garden, and the high, black walls were now covered with ivy and creepers, that took away the prison look from the enclosure.

There was a carriage-drive through the centre of this garden, terminating in a sweep before the great oaken doors of the castle. As Sir Mark pulled up, these doors opened, and George, seeing the face of the butler, who was waiting to receive his master, exclaimed:

"Why, that is Corby!"

"Yes," answered his cousin. "I think you will find all your old friends inside — at least, I have parted with none of them. Bob died last winter. You remember Bob, who taught us both to ride. That is the only man who was here in my father's time who is not here now, and perhaps they won't be glad to see you! Corby, who do you think this is? Why, you don't mean to say you forget him? He knew you."

"I declare it's master George," cried the old man, joyfully. "We have all asked about you so long sir,

we thought it was of no use asking any more." And then George went through the halls and corridors, shaking hands with one and another of the people, who had known him from the time he was a boy. It was a change from Fen Court certainly, where no voice ever welcomed his return, to Snareham Castle, with the servants crowding about him, and hoping he was well and coming back to live near them.

If he had been the owner twenty times over they could not have seemed more glad to see him.

"If her ladyship was here now she would be pleased," remarked the housekeeper. "She has said to me times out of number she was sure you were gone to India, and that she would never see you again."

"I have not been to India," answered George, laughing, "though I have been in places my aunt would think stranger than that;" and having thus parried the housekeeper's question, he turned to Mark, whose face had fallen a little when the woman spoke of his mother.

For Lady Geith had always been fonder of George Geith than of her own son, and made no secret of her preference, and it was not singular, therefore, that any allusion to her predilections proved painful to Sir Mark.

Nevertheless, being of a very generous nature, he bore no grudge to George, but welcomed his cousin as cordially to Snareham as though there had never been any cause for jealousy between them.

"He could not," so he told George after dinner, "forget the old times when they were boys together, and he wanted some one of his own blood to talk to."

"I have no person now at all," he added, as he pushed the wine towards his cousin; "my father is dead, and I believe my mother hates me; and my uncle Arthur is very little better than an idiot, and his wife says I am not a Geith at all. And when I want to marry, that old devil, Mrs. Lennor, sets her face against Cissy, and makes my mother ten times worse than ever." "We are not on terms now at all. Her ladyship and Mrs. Lennor live in Halkin Street, and I stay here."

"I do not understand how it is you and your mother cannot agree," remarked George.

"It is Mrs. Lennor," was the reply; "I believe that if the old hag were out of the country, we should get on well enough. But she is like an open blister, and I get so mad to think what a fool I have been, that it makes matters worse."

"How have you been a fool?" asked George.

"Oh, spending money, and being a devil of an idiot," was the reply. "I came into an unencumbered estate — that is, unencumbered except by myself — and instead of paying off the Jews, and making a clean breast of affairs to my solicitor, I must needs begin improving and spending, and making ducks and drakes of everything I had. And so the end of it all is, I can't marry without my mother's help, and she won't give it, not though I threatened to cut off the entail."

"You threatened to do what?" asked the next heir, and his face was not pleasant to look at.

"Cut off the entail," repeated Sir Mark, with some confusion; "of course I had not the slightest intention of doing anything of the kind, but I thought it worth while to try the effect."

"And what did your mother say?" asked his cousin, with not unnatural interest.

"Why, she cut up deuced nasty, dared me to do it, and said, if I injured your prospects in any way, she would make me bitterly repent my imprudence. We had a devil of a row; and when I suggested that, as we had not heard anything of you for so long a time, it was likely as not you were dead, she broke out crying as if her heart would break. I declare, George," added Sir Mark, quite seriously, "I sometimes think there was some mistake, and that you are Lady Geith's son, not I."

"Considering how long an heir was looked for, and that I am four years your senior, the idea seems unlikely," answered his cousin.

"Anyhow," went on Sir Mark, "my mother and I have never stabled our horses together at all; and now, in a matter where my happiness is really involved, she won't hold out a finger to help me. She says she will not give a sixpence to free Snareham during her lifetime, and that at her death she intends leaving her fortune to you."

"I hope and trust she will do nothing of the kind," said George Geith, and he said so in good faith.

"She says she will, and I believe she intends to be as good as her word. I do not think she ought, you know," added Sir Mark; "I do not see why she should pass me by, for you; but I would rather you had her money than Mrs. Lennor."

"Mrs. Lennor is more likely to have the bulk of it than either of us," remarked his cousin; "I wonder what my aunt can see in that woman to like. I always hated her."

"It was mutual," answered the baronet; "for she always hated you. But my mother does not like her; though she is influenced by what she says, and takes her word for gospel, I do not believe she likes her. I have often fancied lately there will be a split there some day; and if it ever does come to that, my mother and I will, I hope, be better friends."

"I trust you will," said George; "and now tell me, what is her objection to Miss Hayles?"

"Want of birth, want of money, want of everything, according to Mrs. Lennor's statement. Absolutely, she says Cissy is not even pretty."

"You should not be surprised at that, remembering she is a woman," observed his cousin.

"Do you think jealousy makes them so blind?" asked Sir Mark.

"No; but I know jealousy makes them lie," said George.

"What a queer fellow you have got," observed Sir Mark; and there was silence for a minute.

Then, "How did you get to know the Hayles?" asked George. "I never recollect your being there in my time."

"I got to know them when I went over to Morelands to try and learn what had become of you," replied Sir Mark, "and since that time, whenever I have been in the country, I have always passed a good deal of time at the rectory; Cissy and I have been engaged now for nearly three years."

"With Mrs. Hayles' full approval, I suppose," remarked George.

"I believe you; the old lady angled so well for me, that if I had not really and truly liked Cissy better

than any girl I ever saw in my life, I should have cut Morelands long ago. As it is, I can't stand much of Mrs. Hayles. That is the reason I will not give Snareham to her husband, though she has set Cissy on to ask me for it many a time. Hang it, she ought to be content. A poor clergyman does not pick up a baronet for his son-in-law every day."

"What an unsophisticated creature you are," said George, "you do not know your own value at all."

"I know the value of my position, at any rate," retorted Sir Mark, "and you know as well as I do too, that pretty, and winning, and graceful as my darling is, she might have stayed unmarried at Morelands till she grew old and ugly, unless she had taken up with one of her father's curates, and gone home to darn his socks and make his shirts."

"Baronets were certainly not plentiful in the parish," acquiesced his cousin.

"I have often wondered," went on Sir Mark, "how you escaped heart-whole, you were so intimate with the Hayleses, you were so much with Cissy."

"I had other things to think about," answered George, shortly; "if you had been compelled to work for your living, and thinking, like myself, how to work to better purpose, you would scarcely have had leisure to get into a mess with Miss Hayles."

"Perhaps so," replied Sir Mark, "and yet I am surprised. Your duties at Morelands could scarcely have kept you so constantly employed as all that comes to."

"It was how to get away from Morelands, and what to be at when I was away, that occupied my thoughts," said the accountant.

"And what the deuce made you want to get away?" asked his cousin.

"I wanted to better my condition," was the reply.

"Very likely; but it was not that took you off from Morelands like a flash of lightning, and prevented you writing to one of us all these years. Come now, George, I have been frank with you: make a clean breast to me in return. Why did you go?"

"That is my secret," said the accountant. "One which I do not mean to confide even to you."

"What a confounded shame," cried Sir Mark. "There is nothing I wouldn't tell you."

"Because at present you have nothing to say which you would not tell to anybody. When you are so rich as to own a secret, you will get a casket and lock it up, and not look at it too often even yourself."

"Well, as far as I know myself, I would keep nothing back from you," said the baronet.

"Which shows how very little you do know of yourself," answered his cousin. "But at any rate, Mark, I cannot tell you the whole of my reasons for leaving Morelands and the Church. They were sufficient as I thought, and the step has turned out well. Do not ask me any more about it, there's a good fellow; but accept as a whole truth the half one, that I went away to better my condition."

"Only one question, George," began Sir Mark, "could money —" but the accountant, laying a hand on his arm, stopped him with —

"Do you forget what I told you once when we were both but lads, that I had promised my mother never to take any money or favour from Lady Geith

or you, except the living your father intended for me. You know she never accepted help, and I know she often stood sorely in need of it; and though I may never now ascertain her reasons for requiring such a promise, I intend to keep my word faithfully."

"Now, do not say that," pleaded Sir Mark, "for I was going to ask you if an awful thing they call capital be not essential in business, and about to offer —"

"Dreadfully hard up though you are yourself, to find me money enough to make my fortune," finished George with a smile. "Thank you all the same, but it cannot be. Were I doing badly, I could not use your purse; and as I am doing well I do not need it. And now I must bid you good-bye, if I mean to get to London to-night."

"We could not catch the express possibly," said the baronet, "so make yourself happy for the night. I am quite serious," added Sir Mark, "and if you doubt it, there is 'Bradshaw,' and there is my watch, which is right to a minute. You see, the express must have passed the junction a quarter of an hour since. If it be a matter of consequence to you, George, I am sorry, upon my word I am."

So was Mr. Geith; he had not intended to stay the night at the castle; but he could not help himself now.

"It is all the better for me," said the baronet, "but I did not intend to let you be late for all that. I wish you would come and stay with me here for a month or two. It would do you a world of good."

"And what would become of my business?" asked George.

"Business be hanged," retorted Mark. "By the by, what did you say your business was?"

"I am an accountant," said his cousin.

"Oh, I remember; you were always a great fellow for figures. Well now, tell me, do not accountants look into estates, and see how people really stand, and what they owe, and what they have?"

"Yes, I often have to do that, both for bankrupts and folks who are solvent enough."

"Well, that is just what I want done," answered the baronet. "I want to know how I stand, and how long it would take me to clear the property, and what the surplus timber would realize if sold. You could come down here and look into things for me, I suppose? I wish you would. I know no more than the man in the moon how I am really situated."

"I could not come here myself," said George, who did not want to do so; "but I might send down a person to value the timber, and then it would be easy to ascertain your exact position. I should recommend you to face that, whether you effect a reconciliation with your mother or not."

"There is no chance of a reconciliation with her unless —"

"Unless what?" asked his cousin, who well knew what was coming.

"Unless you would go to my mother and talk the matter over with her. She would consent to my marriage if you asked her, I have no doubt; and I should be grateful to you for ever."

"That might depend on whether Miss Hayles made a good wife or not, I should say," answered George a little cynically; "but without any reference to future

gratitude at all, if it will oblige you in the present, I am quite ready to go to my aunt on your behalf, I can but fail."

"I do not know how to thank you," exclaimed the baronet.

"There is not the least necessity for you to try," answered George Geith, quietly. "If I can make peace between you and your mother, it will be but a very humble return for her kindness to me. All the pleasant days I can ever remember to have spent I owed to her; and though you and she cannot agree, Mark, I maintain there never breathed a better woman, nor a truer lady."

Having given utterance to which opinion, the accountant rose, as if to end the conversation, and walking to one of the windows put aside the heavy curtains and looked out into the night.

While the cousins were talking, the moon had been climbing high into the heavens, and now bathed the woods and fields surrounding Snareham Castle in a flood of silver light.

"Will you take me round the old place, Mark?" asked George. "It may be many a long day before I see it again;" and the pair went out into the gardens, from whence they passed into the shrubberies, and then wandered back to the upper terrace, which they paced slowly, side by side.

The old castle, with its new wings, flung a shadow over the two kinsmen, and from the building the ground sloped sharply down the hill-side to the village of Great Snareham, that lay in the valley beneath.

Over the lower woods, George could see the Tower of Great Snareham Church rising above the trees.

Buried in one of its vaults lay all his ancestors, and all his deceased relations, except it might be the two drowned sons of Mrs. Arthur Geith, whose bodies had never been recovered. Two more, whose corpses were washed ashore after the accident which left her childless, slept there tranquilly, as well as the late baronet, and his brother, the Rev. Adolphus Geith, and George's grand-uncle, that gallant Geith who came back from Waterloo covered with wounds, to die. For generations the Geiths had been so small a band that the great house gathered its dead jealously together. Brothers and nephews, and cousins, however far divided in life, were brought home to the family estate, and buried side by side. It had often been remarked in George's hearing, how few the coffins were which sufficed to contain those who had carried the name through previous centuries, and yet, so far as could be ascertained, none save the two boys were missing.

Some such observation the accountant made at length to his cousin, who answered:

"Yes, there are two others, the son and the grandson of that old Sir Harry, who fought so well for King Charles. When we were clearing out the Norman Tower, we came on the son's portrait, hanging in a dark passage with its face to the wall, and the word traitor painted over the picture. I cannot have the word obliterated without destroying the face, so I have hung it up in the gallery with an addendum of my own below. Walter Geith took the side of the Parliament, and fell at Cropready Bridge. His wife brought the body here, but across the moat which lay where the ladies' flower-garden is now, Sir Harry cursed him,

and her, and her unborn child, and prayed that the spawn of a traitor might never be master of Snareham.

“‘Whereupon,’ says the manuscript from which I derived my information, ‘the lady bade the men who carried her husband’s body place the corpse on the ground, and she kneeled down beside it and kissed his forehead, and then prayed in return:

“‘That if no son, or son’s son, of the dead man ruled at Snareham, the estate might never pass from father to son, but come to be owned by strangers, and the name blotted out for ever.’

“A nice wish,” finished Sir Mark; “but the poor soul was beside herself with grief. After she had finished her prayer, she rose and went away with her dead to the old parsonage house, where the then clergyman, who had known her husband from a boy, took her in and gave her food and shelter. Two days after, she died in giving birth to a still-born child — a son; and they laid the three in one grave in the churchyard, together. So far the story; now for a strange thing about the portrait. It is as like you as it can be. Shall we go in and look at it?” and Sir Mark led the way across many a room, and along many a passage into the picture gallery, which was little more than a broad corridor, lighted by three long windows, and ornamented at each end by a steel mirror.

There were many male Geiths and their wives; the former, frank, Saxon looking men; the latter, stiff, prudish dames, holding flower in hand or hawk on wrist, with a certain stately solemnity.

The daughters of the house were abundant, the

sons few and far between; surrounded by a bevy of girls, hung Sir Harry, the Royalist, whilst at a little distance from him was suspended the portrait of his only son. From corner to corner of the picture ran the disfiguring letters, but still through the word, as through the bars of a prison, the grave thoughtful face looked down on the last males of an ancient house.

Over the neck of his horse an arm was thrown; the left hand held a plumed hat; long, dark curls, fell over his shoulders, and a countenance which might have been George Geith's, had George ever looked handsome, stood out from the canvas.

"It is you, George, to a certainty," remarked his cousin, after a long pause. "We always said we could not tell where you had got your face, but we know now. It is strange how some members of a family cast back, is it not?"

"I wonder," was the accountant's reply, "if that son did die, or whether he lived and had children?"

"Whether he did or not," observed Sir Mark, a little coldly, "makes the marvel none the less. Neither my father, nor your father, or even uncle Arthur, resembled this man, and yet they three were brothers."

"True," answered George, as he passed over to look at the portrait of the late baronet.

How well he remembered the face, bold, daring, frank, sensual, handsome, smiling.

From father to son George Geith glanced critically.

"There can be no question about your descent, Mark," he said at length.

"So I tell Mrs. Arthur, but she says she cannot

trace the likeness," answered the baronet, with a somewhat forced laugh.

"Then she must be blind," was the accountant's comment; and as he turned away, those who knew George Geith well could have told that he was something more than satisfied, and something less than pleased.

CHAPTER IX.

Back to Town.

THROUGH the night George Geith lay awake thinking; or, rather, he lay passive, whilst all manner of vague ideas chased each other through his mind. The events of the day, the confessions of Mark, olden memories, future plans, filled the mental canvas to overflowing; whilst, over all these, lay a kind of hazy wonder as to whether Mark were really the rightful owner of Snareham, as to what was the mystery lying between him and his mother. From boyhood Lady Geith had never cared for him. An only son, the heir of a large estate, he could do no right in her eyes. She had tried to be just, George knew, but George knew likewise that her trials in this respect had sometimes proved signal failures.

He could remember the triumphant pride of the late Sir Mark in his child, but he had never seen Lady Geith evince any pride in her son save when Mrs. Arthur Geith was present, at which periods she would have brought down the moon, could her so doing have pleased the future baronet. Mrs. Arthur had never been a friend to Mark. She had tried to sow enmity between him and George; she said openly her nephew

was illegitimate, and her sister-in-law — but as her remarks were slanderous they need not be repeated here. As Lady Geith had disliked her husband, so Mrs. Arthur Geith disliked her. People knew that the Geiths had played at cross-purposes with their wives; that Mrs. Arthur would fain have stood in her ladyship's shoes, and that her ladyship would gladly have taken her fortune and person to the country vicarage where Adolphus Geith made his humble home; so perhaps Lady Geith's indifference to her son arose in dislike to his father, and her liking for George out of heart-breaking memories of the man she once hoped to marry.

The more he tried to unravel the skein, the more tangled it grew. Was Mark, as had once been suggested by Mrs. Arthur, his brother? That was utterly impossible; for his mother would never have sold her own flesh and blood to aid a deception. Had Mark been changed at nurse? His likeness to his father forbade that idea. Had the late baronet introduced a false heir into the family? Lady Geith would never have tolerated such an intrusion; she would only have been too glad to tell the story years before, and confound the plans of both father and child. There was but one solution of the enigma, which George Geith did not reject as worthless.

A previous contract, a living wife, which rendered Lady Geith's marriage null and void, and her children illegitimate.

Might not this, as the years went on, account for much which had puzzled George and piqued the curiosity of society? Her keen desire for him to marry Lettice, her only daughter; her laying them out for

each other from the time they were children, and weeping so bitterly when she told George his little wife was dead; might she not in this way have wished to make him reparation? Might her leaving him her fortune not be, after all, but some plan of doing justice at last? Mrs. Lennor possibly knew of the prior connection; that might account for the influence she exercised over his aunt. His mother might have guessed the truth, and broken off her intimacy with her sister-in-law in consequence.

If this were so, George could pity; ay, and though he was the loser by the fraud, forgive. As for any insinuation which made Lady Geith a deliberate sinner and hypocrite, the accountant indignantly rejected the idea. He had ever found Lady Geith thoughtful, and good, and kind; and he was not going to have his faith in her destroyed, even though his own — but at this point the accountant shook his thoughts aside for a moment.

Was he going mad? Was he about to turn imaginative in his practical manhood? What reason had he to suppose that Mark's title to Snareham was other than good, beyond Mrs. Arthur's angry assertions and the old tradition, the origin of which he had just learnt, that no son would ever succeed his father at the castle?

Till Mark's time, no son, for generations, ever had. That was curious! Mark himself had remarked he was glad to break the spell, and George had drily replied:

"I do not doubt it, as you benefit by the change."

But was George going to be influenced by old women's tales? Was he going to leave his business to

run after a will-o'-the-wisp? If Snareham brought bad nights and evil thoughts; if it were a snare to sense, and a lure to discontent; if it were a foe to domestic happiness; a cause of repining and dissatisfaction, George Geith would have none of it. He would go back to London, and work, and fight and win. He would, being a poor man, renounce the position which none but a rich man could occupy with honour. He would be no hanger-on of a great house; he would have no heart-burnings, no such speculations as disturbed him now, for the future. And he closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep. Then the face of the Puritan obtruded itself; then he saw Cissy Hayles gliding along the terraces, a very charming Lady Geith; then he was back in Fen Court, labouring to free himself from the old chains; then he was at Morelands; then quarrelling with Mrs. Hayles; again shrinking from the rector's statement that he knew why he had left the Church; but at last all the distorted shapes faded away, and left the over-tired man sleeping quietly.

Next morning when he awoke, the fantastic procession of the night was gone, and George Geith arose, and dressed himself quickly, in order to catch the first up-train to London.

"So, you won't stay," said his cousin. "You won't be sociable and come and relieve the tedium of a poor devil's life; but you will go back to the City and serve Mammon for seven years longer. Well, I won't say you are wrong; I am satisfied nature made a mistake when she ever gave a Geith a fortune. We are a race intended to work, and you are going to prove the truth of my proposition. You will be rich some day

when I am poor. When I have made all Snareham a pond to float my ducks, you will be buying properties, and standing for the county. When I am retrenching on the continent, you will be a great man in London."

"I shall never be a great man anywhere," George replied, and yet his thoughts belied his words. He was looking forward to wealth, position, consideration; and if these things do not constitute greatness to the children of this world, I should like to know what does.

"I wish you would let me give you a leg up," observed Sir Mark.

"Thank you heartily," answered George, picking his phrases out of his cousin's vocabulary; "but if ever I reach the winning-post, I should like to be able to say: I chose my horse; I trained him; I mounted, and I rode the race without a helping hand from anybody."

"You are as obstinate as old Sir Harry," remarked his cousin, peevishly: "but if you will not be helped, and if you will go, it is time we were on the road. When do you think you can see my mother? You perceive *I* am not above asking a favour from you."

"The rich man confers a favour on the poor by requesting his services," said George, with that bitterness which cropped up, every now and then, to the surface; "but a favour crushes the poor man, and destroys his liberty of action."

"Well, I'll be hanged," retorted Sir Mark, "if I'd see things with your eyes for a dukedom."

"Things stand in different lights for you and me,"

was the accountant's tranquil reply; "and it is, therefore, natural they should look different to us."

And with this truism, George Geith may be said to have taken his leave of Snareham Castle; for five minutes afterwards the cousins were driving away from its entrance-gates to the station, as fast as Sir Mark's favourite horse could take them.

They had no time to spare; indeed, as the baronet pulled up, they could see the express coming grandly along the line.

"Good-bye; do come to see me soon again," said Sir Mark, standing outside the carriage-door, and grasping hands with his cousin.

"Good-bye, Mark, and thank you. I will be sure to write whenever I have seen —"

But the train was off, and George could not finish his sentence. The baronet waved his hand in token of farewell, and already the train was panting out of the station, and the cousins were parted once again.

But George caught another glimpse of his relative at a curve where the line crossed the road leading to Snareham Castle. Up the highway, the accountant could see that terrible black horse come tearing on.

For an instant, Mark slackened the reins whilst he nodded in answer to his cousin's signal of recognition; and taking advantage of this oversight, the animal made a leap forward, and then started off at full gallop under the archway over which the train was passing.

Shifting his position to the other window, George watched the dog-cart spinning away towards Snareham Castle, with Mark leaning back in it, and pulling in the frightened animal with all his might. Luckily it

was up-hill the whole way to Snareham from the station, and the accountant had the satisfaction of seeing that his cousin was getting the best of the battle before a cutting shut horse and driver, and all the well-remembered places, from his view. And so they parted; so the one man went back to his castle, and the other to his office; so the two last young men, of an old house turned each into his separate path.

It is with that George elected to tread we have to do; so we may just as well travel back with him to London, and see what he thought of by the way.

Putting aside the dreams of night — refusing, as in the past he had always done, when in his sober senses, to speculate on his cousin's anomalous position, or to think of the possibility of himself ever inheriting Snareham and a title, George began to consider his own prospects *de nouveau*, and to raise up a great Tower of Babel, the golden pinnacles of which touched the skies. Did he mourn about Cissy Hayles? did he grieve because the little sunbeam of love which had fallen so softly across the darkness of his heart was proved to have no warmth, no power of vitality in it? No; George was glad to know Cissy and her mamma as they were — glad to think he had escaped from that danger scatheless.

He fancied how much harder his hard life would be if mated to such a wife as Cissy; he imagined the horror of having to listen to Mrs. H.'s opinions, and worse still, of having, perhaps, to conform to some of her ideas. He thought of the tirades against business he should hear if he had the misfortune to be Mrs. Hayles's son-in-law. He had a horrid vision of the way in which society, and the opinion of the world,

and the opinion of dear Cissy's friends would have been thrown at him by her worthy parent. It is a fine thing to see a woman you have loved, engaged to be married to a grander person than yourself; for there is not a flaw, mental or physical, that is not revealed to you then. You change in a moment from being her lover to being her critic; and she comes out of the shade she has hitherto affected, and floats up and down in the full sunshine of self-glorification, in order to show, all unconsciously, the frailty and flimsiness of the butterfly you would once have passed through brake and through brier to secure. Many a man, though, will moan, even after a butterfly, if she be only pretty enough; but George Geith could never have done this. Once satisfy him the star he worshipped was willing to shine on any one, and there was an end of his fancy. Should he sit down and mourn because the illusion was dispelled? Emphatically not. He had not bought the picture, and he was not going to grieve because he had seen it in a fair light. Let her go. If Mark liked her, well and good. She would make a good wife for a baronet; but for a poor man, for a struggling man — gracious heavens! what right had a poor and struggling man to think of a wife at all? What were wives? Curses sometimes, luxuries always, helpmates never. Why, even in the garden of Eden, George reflected, Adam's wife could not behave herself, but must needs bring trouble to her husband and all that came after him. No, he decided against matrimony altogether; he reflected that money, which could buy all things, was the only solid good; and as he knew by experience that industry could command money, he returned to London resolved to think of business more persistently

than ever, to make wealth his object, work his means.

Hitherto he had met with no check in his business, and like most men who have done a small certain trade, and kept their accounts close up, he fancied that he should, with prudence, be able gradually to increase his connection, and continue as fortunate in the future as he had been in the past.

He forgot then, what he had been told in his youth, viz., that a man never makes a good rider till he has been thrown. Had he remembered this, he might have known that the management of the business steed is rarely understood by those who have not, some time or other, licked the dust.

There! a sudden change in the markets, the failure of a good house; the upset of a basket holding all his eggs, and the man is down! Help him up, ye Samaritans; or at least, stand aside and do not trample him till he can rise of himself.

He is blinded with mud and dirt; he is stunned by the force of the fall. He is giddy and confused; but still give him a hand and let him mount again, for he may do well yet. If he be wise he will not attempt impossibilities. He will attend to his business, he will eschew marshy ground. He will not try to ride over spiked walls; he will not exhaust his strength, and then attempt to race with those who come fresh and powerfully mounted on the ground. He will remember that misfortune is usually another name for folly, that being deceived, implies having been over-confident, and so goes on safely to the end.

But for the man who is always being thrown, my readers, do not waste your pity on him. Let him get

out of the mire as he can; let the boys jeer him when he talks of accident; let him subside into clerkship — servitude — whatever opens for him, and believe he is safer there, and that it is better for the community he should be there, than ruining other people, and running the risk of breaking his own neck.

One fall, but not a dozen, makes a man cautious. Many a man is courageous merely because he does not understand danger, and therefore the shock which teaches prudence is oftentimes the mere prelude to ultimate success.

This shock George Geith had never felt, and therefore he plunged back into the business vortex, oversanguine of victory, over-confident in himself.

He counted the harvests that were to make him rich and independent; he saw the end, but not the road to it; and as the omnibus that conveyed him from Euston Square to the City, lumbered through the streets, his seat beside the driver was converted into a throne, from whence he issued edicts to fate and conferred honours and favours on himself innumerable.

When he reached Fen Court there were people waiting the chance of his return. That was satisfactory. He could recollect the time when it was he who waited and not his clients. Now, his outer office looked like that of a prosperous man; and with a certain sense of triumph at the business success he had achieved, the accountant attended to those who were bringing corn to his mill.

The first man who entered the inner office — that private sanctum which commanded a view of the churchyard and the trees — was short and stout in figure, with a white face, and lank, unwholesome-

looking hair. He had a great deal to say about the weather, which did not please him, as a slight rain, that made the streets greasy, had just set in.

"Shan't sell six-penn'orth to-day," he opined; "it's well to be you whose trade don't vary with the weather."

"It is better to be you who make a hundred and fifty per cent. when the weather is fine," retorted Mr. Geith.

"Oh! come now," expostulated the draper, "that is too bad, and you a bachelor."

"The dread of your bills is likely to keep me so," was the reply, whereupon the pair laughed and got to business.

Mr. Acton's books had fallen into a tangle which he wanted the accountant to unravel. This was the sum of his first statement, but it soon transpired that he wanted something else, viz., to have the work done for less than half-price.

Mr. Geith, however, was firm; there were days when he would not listen to any abatement, and this chanced to be one of them. Moreover, though mentally well balanced, he could not come down straight away from the terraces of Snareham Castle to the level of Mr. Acton's shop, and so he ended the discussion more abruptly than was his wont.

"How and ever," said the draper, in reply, "I cannot afford your price nohow. Five pounds is the outside I can give."

"And ten is my charge, and the least I shall take," answered Mr. Geith loftily.

"Then I must carry the work to somebody else, that's all," and Mr. Acton reluctantly took up his hat.

"That is a matter for you to decide," remarked

the accountant, and he turned to his letters as a signal for the other to go. But the other would not take the hint.

"You will think about it?" he suggested, after a pause. "Certainly not," was the reply, and Mr. Geith began cutting open the envelopes.

"Would another sovereign?" tried the client. "Now, Mr. Acton," said George, decidedly, "you are but wasting my time and your own. The lowest price I can take is ten pounds. If you like to give that sum well and good. If not, well and good still, only I do not make up your books for less."

He had opened his letters by this time, and began reading them, as if Mr. Acton were not standing opposite to him. Business is not improving to the manners. Lord Chesterfield himself, had he been compelled to earn his bread in the City, would probably have had to choose between starvation and a polished address.

George Geith having made his choice at a very early period of his commercial life, went on perusing his letters whilst Mr. Acton watched him.

At first the draper considered this absorption a ruse, but after a time, finding no notice taken of him, he removed his arm from the corner of the desk, and observed:

"I will consider the matter, then."

"Very well," answered George.

"Good-day," said the draper.

"Good-day," replied the accountant, and the door opening on the landing closed behind that client.

As it did so, client No. 2. entered from the outer office, and Mr. Geith laid down his letters.

This visitor proved to be the brother of a person in

difficulties who wanted a balance-sheet prepared. The man being steeped in debt was, of course, indifferent about expense. All he wished was expedition. Could the business be completed without delay?

"Assuredly," and the matter was settled. No. 2 went out, and No. 3 came in. This individual wanted money, and having got it, buttoned his coat, resumed his umbrella, lifted his gloves, and departed, making way for No. 4, who turned out to be Mr. Foss.

"What can I do for you?" asked the accountant, after he had shaken hands with the young man. "I hope you do not want any business help from me."

"I do and I don't, if you can understand that," answered Mr. Foss, with a blush Miss Gilling might have envied. "I called to ask, if you knew of anybody in want of a clerk."

"Why, do you know any one in want of a situation?" asked Mr. Geith.

"Yes; I should be glad of anything I could get," replied Mr. Foss, and he blushed again a deeper red.

"I thought you had such a first-rate berth at Twine's," remarked the accountant.

"So I had," said the young man, ruefully, "but I got notice on New Year's-day, and left last Saturday. They pay everybody weekly, from the cashier down, in that office, and so I'm adrift."

"What is their reason for parting with you?" inquired George.

"Mr. Twine's nephew wanted a place, and mine was the only one they could give him."

"What did you learn there?" asked George, "dock work chiefly, was it not?"

"Yes, and I wrote letters, and used to help the

cashier sometimes too. I am a pretty good hand at accounts," added Mr. Foss, with a longing look round Mr. Geith's office, which look, made that gentleman smile.

"Cannot Mr. Bemmidge make room for you?" he inquired.

"He has not work enough for himself," replied the other, "and he knows no one wanting a clerk. It was he told me to come to you, and said most likely you would be able to put me in the way of doing something."

"Perhaps you both thought I might be requiring a second clerk myself?" observed the accountant, at which suggestion Mr. Foss coloured to the very roots of his hair, and took refuge in absolute silence. "I do not know that I can take you on," continued Mr. Geith, after a short pause, "or that, if I could, my place would be worth your acceptance; but I will think the matter over, and you might look in again in a day or two. Meantime, if you hear of anything better, do not consider yourself bound in any way to me." And George Geith turned to his letters again, as a hint to Mr. Foss that he considered the business which had brought him there ended, and that the sooner he left the office the better he should be pleased.

"Good afternoon, and thank you," said the young man, who had seen enough of business to know clearly what the accountant meant; and he was going away without offering his hand, only that George prevented him. They were not master and man yet, and perhaps the accountant's conscience accused him for having been rude to a person who was so very easily snubbed as Harry Foss. At any rate, he said "Good-bye, and

if I can do anything for you, I will," in a tone which made the applicant's face brighten considerably, and sent him away in a happier frame of mind than that in which he had been making his exit.

Before he entered the office he had intended to tell Mr. Geith how important a thing it was for him to get a situation at once; how he had a sister dependent on him for daily bread; how hard he was able to work, and for how small a salary he would be willing to labour. He had made up quite a little volume on his way from Nicholas Lane to Fen Court, but somehow, when he got into the commercial presence-chamber, the narrative was forgotten, and his fine sentences were exchanged for the few bald phrases I have set down. He could have told all about himself to Mr. Geith that night at Ivy Cottage; but Mr. Geith in office was a different man from Mr. Geith at Andrew Bembridge's. He was quite as formidable an individual as Mr. Twine, and Mr. Twine moved among his clerks, like an Eastern despot among his slaves.

If he were accepted at Fen Court, the young man saw, he would, spite of Mr. Bembridge's acquaintance with his principal, be but a clerk till the end of the chapter. He was a little surprised, perhaps, but he need not have been, for it is in the nature of business to make aristocrats of employers, of millionaires, and of creditors. And of the importance of marking this line broadly, George Geith was well aware, for it is not easy "to blow up" a man who can answer you on terms of equality; it is a very difficult matter to keep a clerk straight who is a friend also.

"If Foss comes, he will have to rough it like anybody else. I can make no distinctions here," reflected

the accountant; from which remark it will be seen George Geith was fitted for the path he had chosen in all respects. He even dared to take on a man he knew, and keep him in his place. An experiment on which, I think, few in his position would have cared to venture.

He had got rid of all his clients, and was going to answer his letters, when he heard some one coming up the stairs, and immediately afterwards his clerk entered the office to inquire whether Mr. Molozane could see Mr. Geith.

"What can the man want?" groaned the accountant. "Send him in, Simmons; but remember I cannot be interrupted again till after post-time." Having uttered which mandate, Mr. Geith descended from his stool, and stood with his back to the fire awaiting Mr. Molozane's entrance.

"I am afraid I am very troublesome," began that gentleman; "if it be inconvenient for you to speak to me now, I can wait. I am not in any hurry."

"Providing I get my letters finished in time for post, I am quite at your service," said George, and he motioned his visitor to a chair.

But Mr. Molozane would not sit down. He came and stood before the fireplace, and looked at the blazing coals, ere he began:

"There is no more hope about the mines, Mr. Geith."

"I am sorry to hear that; I trust you are safe."

"No; I could not sell. I wish to God!" went on the poor dupe, vehemently, "I had come to you twelve months ago, I might have got rid of the shares then;

but that is all past now, so there is no use talking about it."

"What have you heard fresh in the matter?" asked the accountant.

"The captain of the miners has absconded, and the directors are going to wind up the concern," and Mr. Molozane dropped his hand on the mantelpiece, with a despairing gesture, as he spoke.

George did not answer for a minute, he only drew that long back breath so common among business people, and looked away from Mr. Molozane ere he spoke.

"I am afraid it is a bad business," he said, at last; "do you know what the liabilities are?"

"No; I cannot learn anything about them."

"Nor the assets?"

"There are none. The captain has taken away close on 20,000 l. with him. The secretary says the police are on his track; but I have no idea they will find him."

"Nor I," answered George; "and if they did it would not benefit you much, for he is not likely to have the money now. Well, whoever else has lost, one man is sure to be safe."

"Who is that? The captain?"

"Your secretary, Punt; he always feathers his nest, no matter who else loses down. How do the directors purpose winding up?"

"I do not know. Is there more than one way?"

"Yes, there are two; one by which you know the worst at once; and another, by which you learn it after years. The first has the advantage in one way, however, it settles the matter immediately; but the second

enables a man to look his position in the face, and see whether he can eventually recover himself."

"Will you tell me exactly," said Mr. Molozane, "what the extent of my liability is likely to be."

"That depends entirely upon the amount the company is in debt, and the solvency of the other shareholders. If all are good men, the loss will be more general than individual; but if many are men of straw, the payments will have to be made by the few who are able and willing to do so."

"What do you mean by willing?" asked Mr. Molozane. "Is there any choice in the matter?"

"There is no choice for you," answered the accountant; "for others there may be."

"How is my position different from that of others?" inquired Mr. Molozane.

"Your position is not different; but you are, or else I am greatly mistaken. Men back out of these kind of things every day. They leave the country; they sell their estates; they get rid of their businesses; they make over their property to some relative on the first sign of danger. There are a hundred ways for men to escape the consequences of their own folly; but there is no honourable way, Mr. Molozane, and I should be advising you wrongly if I said there were."

"Then what do you suppose will be the result of it all to me?"

"That depends on the extent of your own property, and of the company's liabilities. You may not have to pay much, and if you have, you may possess sufficient to pay everything and still leave a surplus."

"And is there nothing I can do meantime? Am I to sit with my hands folded, and see my money taken away by thieves? — for I can call them nothing else, Mr. Geith, but thieves, damned thieves!"

"If you mean, can you resist the claim, most certainly not; but you could go down into Cornwall and see for yourself what the Sythlow Mines are. It has happened before now that valuable mines have been declared unproductive, and sold to friends of the directors, who made fortunes whilst the shareholders were ruined. Remember, I do not think such will prove to be the case in this instance; but still, if I were you, I should go and judge for myself."

"Thank you; I will follow your advice. And now, Mr. Geith, you must not refuse a fee to-day. I have no one else to come to, but you, and no one else to consult with; and if you decline to receive payment, you will shut me out from the only adviser I have."

And the poor, proud gentleman, whose pride had received such a mortal blow within the last few months, laid down a fee, carefully done up in paper like a doctor's, on the chimney-piece. So long as he had a sixpence left he did not want anyone to give him anything, even kindness, for nothing.

Could the accountant have with any reason accepted the fee, I think he would have taken it; but, as it was, he pushed the money gently away, and said:

"As I have done nothing for you so far, Mr. Molo-zane, I cannot take a fee; but, unless you know what you have, and what you owe much better than the majority of the gentlemen with whom I come in contact, you will want an accountant's help ere long. If

you like to come to me then, I will make a charge. Now, however, I cannot."

"But the time I have occupied," urged Mr. Molo-
zane.

"I wish all my clients occupied as little," said George; "I should be either an idler, or a richer man. I have to listen not merely to business, but also to family histories here, and nobody thinks of paying me for doing so."

"I wish you would let me pay you, though," entreated Mr. Molo-
zane.

"You shall, certainly, if ever I do any business for you; and, perhaps, if you ascertain anything about the mines you will let me know. Some of my clients may be interested in the matter, for aught I can tell; and, at any rate, I like to be 'up' in these things. I hope the affair may not turn out so badly as you fear."

"It cannot turn out worse, at any rate," said the country gentleman, mournfully, and he held out his hand in farewell.

George could not but notice how much more meekly he performed this ceremony than on the occasion of his previous visit. A mightier leveller, so far as this world is concerned, than death, was bringing the man who despised trade, down to something lower far than any honest calling.

Away in the distance he saw beggary looming before him; and with that awful presence growing clearer and clearer at every step, the old social distinctions faded into insignificance, and Ambrose Alfred Molo-
zane, Esq., of Molo-
zane Park, in the county of Herts, discovered that there was some faint comfort to be derived from telling his anxieties and his misery, even

to a man who mixed with low people, and transacted business in Fen Court.

CHAPTER X.

Lady Geith.

WHEN Mr. Molozane came out of Mr. Geith's office, the January day was drawing to a close, and darkness and a penetrating rain were striving which should reach the City first.

Up and down Fenchurch Street the country gentleman looked disconsolately; not that he cared about the state of the weather. Hail or sunshine, it was much the same to him. The Sythlow Mines were not going to make his fortune; nay, were most probably going to ruin him. What, therefore, did the rain signify? Let it rain. He did not quarrel with the wet, slippery pavement, the streaming gutters, the splashing cabs, or the women who carried umbrellas as soldiers carry fixed bayonets, charging the unhappy passer-by with them. There are people, it is said, who have some choice concerning the weather and the place in which they shall be hung; but Mr. Molozane could not have understood any solicitude of this kind.

He felt the rope about his neck, and nothing could add to the misery of that sensation.

What did the puddles, which reflected back the light from the gas-lamps, signify to him? What did the wet signify? What did anything signify? And in this pleasant frame of mind he proceeded up Cullum Street, and along Leadenhall Street, and so, through the pelting rain to Shoreditch Station, where he sat him down, to wait patiently till such time as his train

should start, and ruminated, weary and fasting, on his position.

Sitting there, with the vice of Whitechapel, and the want of Bethnal Green, and the sin and the misery huddled together to the west of Shoreditch, within almost a stone's throw of where he sat, he verily believed himself to be the most wretched man breathing. And yet he had only lost money; while, gracious heavens! there were those out on the street he had just left — out, with the gas-lamps streaming on their haggard faces — out, reeling away from the doors of gin palaces — out, with thin soaking garments, with poor shoes that let the mud in at every step, who had lost money, and home, and virtue, and, so far as man could tell, their souls too. I do not know how it is, that no depth of misery seems able to make its cry heard unto another; that wretchedness is ever blind to the fact of there being a trouble greater and more hopeless than its own; that whatever sorrow comes to a man, he considers it the worst mortality can be called on to suffer. It is not so with joy. From the hill-tops of success and pleasure come glad shouts of triumph over the plain; and humanity, no matter on how lofty a peak it stands, ever considers that the cries are borne down to its level, from higher pinnacles than its own. Success knows no contentment, wretchedness no alleviation. The one is all eyes, ears, and attention, and the other, blind, deaf, sullen. "Why should they have more than I?" shouts the man who ought to be happy. "Was ever mortal so hardly dealt with?" is the groan of each of us who feels the lash of trouble laid never so lightly on his back.

"What have I done that this trouble should have

come upon me?" thought Mr. Molozane, as he sat in the dingy waiting-room.

"I wonder if any of those I see passing by have made such miserable failures of their lives as I," murmured Lady Geith, looking with weary eyes out into the gathering darkness.

And she sighed. With reason too, for she had sinned. And not all the tears she could weep, not all the groans she could utter, might ever undo the wrong she had done, or make reparation for it. Yet it may fairly be questioned whether Lady Geith ever fully realized to herself the enormity of the crime of which she had been guilty. She felt the inconvenience it entailed on herself and others. She would have given much to have been able to get out of the tangle she herself had woven. She was very sorry. She had suffered acutely. But, nevertheless, I do not think she knew, so far, the meaning of the word repentance.

She did not know what it was to lie down with her sorrow at night, and get up with it in the morning. She did not know what it was to weep tears that blister the heart instead of relieving it. She had not the faintest conception of what it is to turn back upon the road of evil, and facing the past with its sin and its sorrow, strive to do right, at last, let the cost be what it will.

She had never been taught what God's providence teaches to every willing scholar sooner or later, that a sin may never remain unatoned for; that wrong must be righted by some one. The days of the Lord are long; years, it may be, pass away, and the morning when the fault was committed seems so far back in our reckoning of time, that we forget the immutable law

of retribution. But the noontide, and the evening, and the night come on for all that, and the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, and the wrong is righted at last, when many weep for the crime of one, and the innocent are swept into the whirlpool which, it was thought, could not touch even the guilty.

"Turn back; turn back!" is the cry of experience to the inexperienced, "whilst it is yet time. You cannot flee from your sin for ever. There may be a mid-day in your life, it is true, when the wrong can throw no shadow; but the wrong is travelling with you, before you, behind you, beside you, for all that. And you must face your trouble now or hereafter; let it be now, when you know the worst, when you know who will suffer, who will be benefited. In the future there will be wives, now unmarried; children, yet unborn; relations, who are now strangers; enemies, who, for so far, are indifferent. There is a great multitude travelling on to meet you in the distance, who will all be involved in your trouble; who will weep; who will curse; who will triumph; who will sin; and who will suffer anguish because of this wrong, which you are permitting to rush onward towards them. 'Turn back; turn back!' and conscience echoing the cry, warns the sinner to strive to right the wrong whilst there is yet time to do it."

To Lady Geith experience and conscience had both cried in vain. She was sorry; she had repented; she would have retraced her roads could she have taken one entire leaf out of her life, and undone the deception which had rendered her existence miserable. Failing this, she decided to drift on with the tide, to repair her fault in her own way, and to make such

compromises with her conscience as might ensure its silence and approval.

She was much like a child who has done mischief, and who, while sorry for having done it, thinks if it can but conceal the fault, there will be an end of the matter. Great consequences springing from little causes; great trees growing silently out of the tiniest seeds, were things Lady Geith did not think about. Present inconvenience she felt, and tried to get rid of; but she now resolutely shut her eyes to the question of future trouble and injustice. Had not her life been a burden to her? Had she not wept, and suffered, and repented?

What more could be demanded of her? Let the irrevocable past lie buried.

But somehow the past would not lie buried. It had a way of appearing before her, which was unpleasant in the extreme. Every now and then a darkness came over her soul, and out of the darkness there crept the old, old days, each with its story, each with its trouble.

For Lady Geith's had not been a happy life. Granted that to a great extent she had made her own unhappiness. What then? Why, then, that was no comfort; and so, sitting in the dusk, in Halkin Street, looking out at the wet pavement, at the glimmering lamps, she found.

Over years and years she travelled, leaning back in her chair listening to the steps of the passers by, hearing the sound of distant street-organs, watching the rain as it came down faster and faster; she journeyed quicker than ever express train swept across

England, from age to youth, to her girlhood to the happy, and hopeful, and innocent long ago.

What had she made of the road since traversed? Watch that which she is contemplating, and then judge.

She is looking at a hopeless love; hopeless, not merely because the man she loved was poor, but because he did not return the love she, a great heiress, was wasting on him. In that she had little to blame herself. With Adolphus Geith, who never thought that a decorous flirtation, conducted on the most religious principles, and in an unexceptionably clerical manner, could bear bitter fruit to any one, perhaps the case was different. He ought to have thought, he ought to have known. He said so himself when he found the strength and weakness of the motherless girl, who had never before stretched out her hand towards anything without possessing it. Her weakness was loving him, her strength forgiving him, and heaping such coals of fire on his head by her generosity that she developed everything which was good in the man's nature, and caused his life to be a more useful one than it could ever have been, had he not met her. She had outlived that love; she had put it aside as a shame and a grief, and looking back, she could see that the one good thing she could remember doing was loving the clergyman's wife, and being mother, friend, sister, all in one, to that most lovable of God's creatures, beautiful, fragile, light-haired, blue-eyed, tender-hearted Rose Stanhope! Thinking of her, spanning in a moment, all the years that lay between the present, and that day when she saw Adolphus Geith's chosen bride for the first time, tears came into

Lady Geith's eyes, and rolled slowly down her cheeks. What a clinging, tender plant it was: how it twined itself around the young heiress, ever putting forth some fresh tendril of sympathy and affection as time went by, and brought trouble with it to her friend. What a slight, frail thing it seemed, and yet the day came when Lady Geith felt it tear itself away, and renounce her.

"I think my secret killed her," thought Lady Geith, and the thought might have been true, for circumstances made the secret a very grievous one to keep, and Rose Geith felt the struggle between right and wrong, between gratitude and self-interest, severely.

Had she lived, it is a question whether she could have continued mute; but she died, and Lady Geith's secret remained intact.

The reader, of course, by this time guesses what that secret was; but before confirming the truth of his idea, I must go back a little and tell how the temptation arose; how Lady Geith came to be so false a woman.

When first she knew the man she afterwards wed, there were three Geiths, brothers; three all unmarried; one, Mark, lived with his uncle at Snareham Castle; one, Arthur, was a barrister with very few briefs; while Adolphus was curate of Little Snareham, in which parish her father was lord of the manor, squire, magistrate, what you will, providing always it be respectable, pompous, worldly, and wealthy.

Squire Hollington was a man of old family; his ancestors had been Druids, and he was able to trace them from the period Stonehenge was erected down to

the nineteenth century. But long though his pedigree might be, it was not longer than his purse. From the Druids, or from some nearer relatives, he inherited estates which brought him in six or seven thousand a year, and from his mother a private fortune of fifty thousand pounds, which he would infallibly have secured to his nephew and the property, had that unhappy young man not been led in an evil moment to question the truthfulness of their genealogical records.

He only doubted the Druids, but that was sufficient. The squire abandoned the idea of a match between him and his daughter then and there, and made no objections to Mark Geith when he came to woo the heiress. Mark Geith was the heir-apparent of Snareham Castle and the baronetage. The Geiths were people of old family also. There was not a drop of blood in their veins but could be proved of the due shade of crimson. It had been poured out like water in the service of kings, good, bad, and indifferent; it had never mingled with impure streams. The Geiths' wives had been ever gentlewomen; some poor and some plain it might be, but still ladies. There had never, so far as he could hear, been a Geith mad, or epileptic, or consumptive, or scrofulous, and this was an immense recommendation.

"If pure blood could keep men from death, the Hollingtons would be immortal," he used to boast. "There never was one of us," and the "us" included the Druids, I may remark, "married into a diseased family, until my brother chose for his wife a woman whose father was in trade and died of softening of the brain. And look at the result; look at Harold; an

effeminate, delicate, lisping creature, who disputes our pedigree, and thinks all men are equal."

There was no fear of Mark Geith thinking all men equal, so long as it buttered his bread to believe otherwise, wherefore he humoured the old man to the top of his bent, and made himself as agreeable as might be to the daughter, who married the elder brother after loving the younger, and who was so simple as never to think that a prospective baronet might be marrying her less for what she was, than for what she had.

The Hollington property, that is, the property which was entailed, passed on the death of the old squire to his nephew; but over and above this, there were lands, and houses, and moneys in the funds which came to Lady Geith strictly secured to her for her sole and separate use.

That his daughter should remain childless never entered into the calculations of the squire. No Hollington's quiver had ever been destitute of juvenile arrows. Indeed, but that death had proved as kind as nature, they might have sometimes seemed inconveniently full. Squire Hollington's father, for instance, was the eldest of a family of thirteen. Squire Hollington himself had three brothers and seven sisters. His wife bore him four daughters and two sons; but one of the former died in infancy, and a couple more a few years later of scarletina; whilst, as for the sons, the eldest, Cedric, was killed by a fall from his horse; and the youngest sank in India under the climate. People said he had trusted too much to the Hollington constitution, and perhaps this was true. Anyhow, he

died and left the squire with only one child, Selina, who became Mrs. — —, and afterwards Lady Geith.

That she should not rear sons and daughters, never, as I said before, crossed Squire Hollington's mind, and he therefore went to his grave in peace, and left his money, as stated, to his daughter.

Just then, Arthur Geith, the barrister, dropped matrimonially into what his friends considered a good thing, and took unto himself a brewer's daughter, who brought to her new home a fortune of a hundred thousand pounds, which had been made out of Thames water, hops and malt. It was a snug certainty for a struggling and penniless man, and Arthur Geith cared very little for the fact that his wife had just set her cap at the prospective baronet, and failed to catch him. He was an easy going man, who hated work and loved pleasure, and who was willing to pay any price for being landed high and dry above the sea of poverty, in which his early youth had been passed. For all the Geiths, save the heads of the family, were poor as church mice. Till the death of his uncle, the eldest brother, the prospective heir had only an allowance of five hundred a year and his wife's fortune.

Mrs. Arthur Geith's money, and Mrs. Arthur Geith herself, proved eventually causes of dissension amongst the Geith clan. She ruled her husband, she reduced him to a mere cipher, she snubbed the clergyman, she insulted his wife, and as the years rolled by and brought no children with them to Snareham Castle, she began to regard herself as presumptive Lady Geith, and manager of the property. She had five sons and two daughters — five fine lads, stood between Adolphus

Geith's only living boy and the title. There was no child at Snareham, had never been one, and so Mrs. Arthur was everlastingly taking her boys to the Castle, and exhibiting the eldest to visitors as "the heir."

A well bred woman had no chance of victory in the vulgar warfare of petty annoyances which Mrs. Arthur waged. As though Lady Geith's marriage had not proved unhappy enough, without any aggravating circumstances being thrown into the scale, Mrs. Arthur must needs put her hand on the beam and make her sister-in-law more wretched still. The culminating point came when Sir Mark "wished to God that he had a child to rid him of that woman's airs."

"I have heard," answered Lady Geith, "that in your family no son ever succeeds his father, so there would seem to be little use in having one."

On which Sir Mark d——d old proverbs, and cursed his luck, and left his wife in tears.

Tears were Lady Geith's most grievous sin in her husband's eyes. He once said she looked more like his mother than his wife, and the remark, though brutal, was true, for at eight-and-twenty, ten years after her most ill-assorted marriage, Lady Geith was a miserable, discontented, peevish woman.

Not that she cared, in reality, about children of her own succeeding to the title. If Mrs. Arthur's boys had been out of the way, she could have looked with complacency on Adolphus Geith's son as the future heir of Snareham; but as it was, the feud between the two women had grown to hatred, and to have caused annoyance to her sister-in-law, to have ensured her plans being frustrated, Lady Geith would

cheerfully have gone down to the family vault, and stretched herself in her coffin with a smile.

Matters had come to this pass, when one Midsummer-day after Mrs. Arthur had been exhibiting her eldest born to some visitors, Miss Teddesley, who was Lady Geith's companion, remarked in her softest, lowest, tone —

“Do you not think, Mrs. Geith, that calling your dear boy the heir, may be a little premature?”

“How — why — what do you mean?” asked the other.

“Only, that if a son were to come, it might cause ——”

“It is not possible,” interrupted Mrs. Arthur, and she turned first red and then white at the bare suggestion.

“I think it possible,” said Miss Teddesley, significantly; “but of course I am not supposed to think at all,” and she sighed and folded her hands demurely, as though whilst submitting to the supposition, she denied its accuracy.

“My dear Miss Teddesley,” began Mrs. Arthur (when had she ever spoken civilly to the companion before), “what are your reasons for making such an extraordinary statement? I cannot believe it possible.”

“I would not then, Mrs. Geith,” observed the companion soothingly. “If my idea should prove correct, the evil will be bad enough when it comes without anticipating it.”

“Many women,” went on Mrs. Arthur, “would say they were glad — would lie and be hypocrites; but I am no hypocrite, thank God; and if Lady Geith

should have a child, I shall always say mine has been cheated out of his inheritance."

"But I may be mistaken," said the companion, by way of consolation; "and, besides, even if I am not, it may be a girl."

"And if it be," retorted Mrs. Geith, "there will be half a dozen sons afterwards," and she flung herself on a sofa, and cried with rage and disappointment.

"I shall ask Selina," she said at last. "Don't talk to me about compromising you. If you wanted the matter kept secret you ought to have held your tongue."

And with this trite remark, Mrs. Arthur dried her eyes, and went off straightway to her sister-in-law, to whom she put her question sharply and suddenly.

Taken by surprise, Lady Geith's denial was both startled and confused. She was so utterly astounded at Miss Teddesley's idea, she was so delighted at Mrs. Geith's evident chagrin, she felt herself placed at once in so different a position to that she had hitherto occupied, that her negative implied an affirmative to the listener's understanding, and Mrs. Arthur went home mystified, crestfallen, and furious.

Then Miss Teddesley came stealing into Lady Geith's dressing-room. That she was not supposed to think was quite a fiction got up for Mrs. Arthur's benefit, because Miss Teddesley did think to great purpose, and could talk too, for that matter.

Not even Lady Geith hated Mrs. Arthur with the same intensity as did Miss Teddesley. Many a slight, many a sneer, which Mrs. Arthur had forgotten, were

stored up by the companion, and thought of as debts to be paid.

She was as silent, as wily as a serpent, and she watched her opportunity till she could get in the thin end of a wedge, destined to part Mrs. Arthur and Snareham as a possession for ever. It was she who tempted Lady Geith, who with her clear head laid out a scheme for bringing a false heir to Snareham, which scheme was not guessed at by any one save Rose Geith.

"I am as certain of it, as I am that I am talking to 'you,'" said she to her husband. "I have not the faintest shadow of a doubt on the subject; but what are we to do, what ought we to do?"

What were they to do, indeed? In blank dismay, the pair, who though suspicious, had still no proof wherewith to confirm those suspicions, asked each other that question day after day, till the opportunity for doing or proving anything was past, for before the young heir was christened, Adolphus Geith sickened, and while the joy bells were ringing at Great Snareham, the young wife was left a widow.

It was not in Rose Geith's nature, however, to suspect such a wrong and hold her peace to the doer thereof; so the time arrived when there was a scene between the sisters-in-law, when Lady Geith offered to compensate for the wrong she had done in money, and Rose Geith flung the offer back at her with scorn.

"Keep your money," she retorted. "You will need it all, or I am mistaken, to buy the silence of your accomplices. Neither I nor mine will ever touch a penny of it. I am sinning enough in keeping your

secret without that. May God forgive us both, Selina," and then she prayed Lady Geith to confess all to her husband, to Mrs. Arthur Geith, and let the mother, whoever she might be, have back her child.

In vain — all in vain. Lady Geith had gone too far to draw back. She could not humiliate herself to Mrs. Arthur Geith; she could not face the world, her husband and her friends; and finding all her arguments and entreaties were urged in vain, Rose Geith went back sorrowfully to her home, and never crossed the threshold of Snareham Castle after.

She let her boy go there, but from a child she taught him independence, and made him firm and self-reliant. And on her death-bed, she made him promise, never to accept money, nor favour beyond the merest courtesies of life from Lady Geith or her son.

"The day may come, George, when you will thank me for exacting that promise. In any case, I know it is well for you to give it."

How faithfully George Geith kept his promise we have seen; and his aunt thought of that sitting in the dusk all alone in Halkin Street.

Changes had taken place in the Geith family during the twenty-eight years that had elapsed since her ladyship thought fit to foist a fictitious heir into their domestic annals; but no change, unless, indeed, it might be the death of her husband, had occurred to render Lady Geith's life happier.

So far from the son's advent making matters pleasanter at Snareham Castle, it had simply made them worse. Long before his birth, Lady Geith knew Sir Mark was aware of her deception, and merely winked

at it for some purpose of his own. She could never forget, and she as certainly never forgave, the sneer with which the baronet received the intelligence of a possible heir. And yet when the boy came, he liked him; he caressed him; he was proud of him.

There was something in the way in which the child was greeted, and she neglected, which galled Lady Geith beyond endurance, and made her almost detest the lad for whom she had dared and suffered so much.

Just about the time that the young heir was christened, Miss Teddesley married and went to China with her husband; but four years afterwards, when the Geiths returned from that foreign tour, during the course of which Lettice Geith was born, Mrs. Lennor came back with them, a widow, who had not been left in good circumstances, it appeared, since she resumed her old post as companion, and devoted herself to Lady Geith with the same assiduity as formerly.

More years passed away, and between sunrise and sunset Mrs. Arthur Geith was left childless. Then Lady Geith stretched forth the right hand of fellowship to her old enemy, all too late. The loss of her children, and the sudden paralysis of her husband, made the unhappy woman almost a maniac. There was no measure in her grief, or in her anger. When she came to Snareham, it was but to reproach Lady Geith, and tell Mark he was an intruder, an interloper, and illegitimate. And after the baronet's death, when Mark absolutely succeeded to the title, she grew rabid, and became so notorious for her slanderous remarks, that people paid no more attention to them

than if she had been an inmate of the nearest lunatic asylum.

But Mrs. Geith, though violent, was not mad. She had grasped a truth intuitively; and could she have shown any logical steps by which she had arrived at the conclusion that Lady Geith was somehow, in the matter of her children, criminal, she would have spared neither time nor money to revenge herself on her sister-in-law.

Had she but known it, she was already amply revenged. The deaths of her sons, the paralysis of her husband, would have left George the certain heir of Snareham, providing Mark had not stood in the way. And Lady Geith knew that; saw that, by her own evil act, the man she would have liked best to see master of the old place, was excluded from his rights. Her plans had succeeded so well, that she was punished through them. She had laboured to knot the ropes that scourged her. She had saddled herself with a son, and with a companion, who were the pests and curses of her daily life; while the rightful presumptive heir of all that vast property was dwelling, Heaven knew where, and living she could not even guess how.

For her brother-in-law she felt no compunction. At Snareham, or in London, he would still be a poor, paralytic, useless creature, who could not enjoy the property if he had it, and to whom the much-coveted baronetage might never bring back health. But George, the son of the man she had once loved, and of the best friend woman ever found in woman! it was the thought of him that wrung her heart, and made her path so difficult to travel. Because, if Mark once married and had children, there was an end of George's

chance for ever. He should not marry. She came round to that decision once again, and was thinking how she might best be able to maintain it, when the door was flung open, and a footman entering with lights, announced at the same moment,

"Mr. George Geith."

CHAPTER XI.

Aunt and Nephew.

"GEORGE, this is unexpected."

"I am very glad to see you again, aunt;" and then they talked about the rain, and the cold, and the season, as though they had been meeting every day for the previous twelvemonth, till the servant left the room and closed the door behind him.

When he had done so, the two looked at each other long and earnestly — looked words that might never be spoken, inquiries which could never be uttered.

How had the years been passed? What had they brought with them? What of joy, what of sorrow, was clasped within the volume containing a large portion of a life which now lay closed before them. Eight years had made the young man middle-aged, the middle-aged woman old. Lady Geith's hair was grey, her face longer, her figure less erect than when her nephew had seen her last; whilst, as for George, the change in his appearance struck his aunt so forcibly that at last she could refrain no longer, but broke the silence with —

"Where have you been? what have you been doing to yourself all these years?"

"Working — in London," he answered.

"In London, and yet never came to see me. George, what was it made you leave Morelands? What could induce you to keep us in ignorance of where you were? You have caused me sleepless nights and wretched days," she went on; "could you not have written even one word to say you were alive and well?"

"I ought to have written," was his reply; "but at first I thought it better to break off all old connections, everything which could shake my resolution. Afterwards, writing seemed useless. The last thing we learn is, to believe that old friends, after years of absence, still think kindly of us."

"You ought never to have doubted me," said Lady Geith, her eyes filling with tears. "If you had been my own son twenty times over, George, I could not have suffered more anxiety on your account. I did not know what to do; I did not know which way to turn. As I could not imagine why you had left Morelands, I was afraid of taking any step that might compromise you. Advertising, private inquiries, might all have led to ——"

"To some other person finding out my whereabouts also," he finished, as she paused and hesitated.

"Yes, nothing but fear, I felt satisfied, could have driven you from Morelands. You had got into some scrape there, and, being too proud to let your friends help you out of it, you fled. Was it not so, George?"

She asked this anxiously, and her nephew understood, in a moment, what she wanted him to tell her.

"I had done nothing wrong, aunt," he replied, with a grave smile, which reassured her; "I had done

nothing wrong, either at Morelands or elsewhere; but I was a fool once in my life, and the consequences of my folly pursued me there and harassed me to such an extent that I was forced at last to adopt the course I did."

"But could money not have relieved you; could your friends — could I — have done nothing in the matter?" — asked Lady Geith.

"Money might have done something, death has," he answered, drawing his breath as he spoke, like a man who lays down a heavy burden which he has carried far and fast.

"And you have nothing now to fear from any one?"

"Nothing; a single grave is long enough and deep enough to hold what caused misery to me."

"You wish to tell me nothing more about your trouble?" she said, inquiringly.

For a minute he was tempted to tell her the whole story; but he put the temptation aside, remembering that confidence, even to the nearest and dearest, usually proves an expensive luxury; and thinking of the old saying, which affirms "that three people can keep a secret if two are away."

Not even for private circulation had George the slightest intention of printing off his folly; for, if once he printed it at all, who could tell where chance and accident, and evil fortune might not bear the tell-tale sheets. He trusted his aunt, certainly, but still it was better to trust no one, and so he answered —

"I would rather not tell you more about it. It is not pleasant to dig down into the past only to bring up skeletons, and I am sure all you really want to be

certain about, is that I did no wrong, and that I am free."

"Thank God for it!" said Lady Geith, earnestly; "but George, 'free' is a strong word to use."

"Not too strong, though," he replied; "a man does not leave his home, forsake his profession, and cast himself adrift from all his relations without a sufficient reason. There is a worse captivity than any prisoner can know within four stone walls. I have felt it, and am competent to speak."

And was not she? As he finished, she bowed her head in her hands; for the echo his words woke in her soul deafened her. Was not she? Good Heavens! what prisoner ever endured a worse captivity? Could chains and bars, and bolts and locks have ever bound her so fast as the consequences of her own sin had done?

If George Geith had sinned likewise; had he confessed to any crime; had he told a tale of temptation yielded to, of wrong committed, his aunt might then have told her story to him, and flung herself at once on his sympathy, his generosity, and his mercy. But to a man who declared he had been only sinned against, how could a sinner speak? And so the opportunity drifted away down the river of time, and the secret of each was still preserved intact.

"Though you do not like talking about the past," said Lady Geith, after a pause, "I suppose you have no objection to tell me your future plans. You will return to the Church, I hope. Great Snareham is not yet vacant, certainly, but there are other livings to be had, and —"

"I shall never re-enter the Church, aunt," he in-

interrupted. "I left it unwillingly; but I know now that I am not fit to be a clergyman; that as years went on I should have wearied of the life, and become dissatisfied with my position. Business is the only really productive field of labour for a poor and pushing man. It is all very well to talk of family influence and good connections. Would any influence have given me my present income, and still left me my independence?"

"I do not know," she answered; "you have not told me what your income is, nor the nature of the business in which you are engaged."

Then George Geith repeated the story which you, my readers, have heard before, of his struggles and his success.

Forgetting the weary drudgery, the mortification, the long-protracted suspense which make the earlier parts of a business life so hard to pass through; forgetting all the prejudices of society against trade, all old bugbears of gentility, all the ideas in which he had been born and bred up, and only feeling how great and grand a thing it is to have fought the battle of poverty single-handed, to have risen unaided and unpatronized, George Geith grew eloquent, and told the tale of years gone by in words that commanded the interest of his listener.

Would to God I could make the details of business as interesting to my readers. I would I could show to men of pleasure and to men of rank what trade really is; what an excitement, what a pain, what a struggle, and when honestly and honourably carried out, what a glory too. Every other class has found some writer to tell its tale; but I can remember no book which has

ever described a shopkeeper as a man, or ventured into that debateable middle land, where talent and energy are struggling from morning to night in dingy offices, in dark warehouses, unknown in the world's eye, solely because business has never yet learnt to be self-conscious; because it is in its very nature to work rather than to think, to push forward to the goal rather than to analyze the reasons which induce it to push forward at all.

And it is this which makes business uninteresting to outsiders. As a rule, a tradesman cannot talk of himself. He speaks of markets, of failures, of losses, of successes; but he cannot, or will not, reveal how these things affected his own feelings and thoughts. The rich can make quite a volume of sentiment out of the merest trifles. The poor are glib enough and pathetic enough concerning their stomachs and a fall in wages. The woes of governesses are drugs in the markets. The trials of sensitive men who cannot make sixpence a year, have been repeated till even young ladies are weary of making heroes of them. Gold-diggers, emigrants, hunters, explorers, all find words with which to interest the public ear. It is only trade, only that which is the back-bone of England, only that which furnishes heiresses for younger sons; only that which sends forth fleets of merchantmen, and brings home the products of all countries; only that which feeds the poor, and educates the middle classes, and keeps the nobility of the land from sinking to the same low level as the nobility of all other lands has done; it is only this, I say, which can find no writer worthy of it, no one who does not jeer at business and treat with contempt that which is holy in God's sight, because it

is useful, and proves beneficial to millions and millions of His creatures.

George Geith, however, was not ashamed of the calling that brought him bread; and his previous education, and the association of earlier years, furnished him with words in which to state the story of the past seven years; how he had come to London friendless, and had since gained a connection; how he had mastered all the details of his business; how he had slaved as a clerk; how he had struggled as a beginner on his own account; how he was now comparatively well-to-do, an independent man, with every prospect of doing better and better as the years rolled on; the first younger son of the Geiths who had ever before bettered his condition save by marriage or inheritance.

And Lady Geith listened. She who had wronged this man, listened and thanked God; for she felt that, in the mysterious course of God's providence, good would come out of evil, and that George Geith was a better and a happier man, labouring in the City, which was a *terra incognita* unto her, than he could possibly be waiting for Arthur Geith's death; sighing away his life till his uncle's shoes should drop from his cold feet, and come to be possessed by him.

She had seen enough of what is called pleasure likewise to be aware its day is not all sunshine, and to be dimly conscious that there is a something higher in life than pleasure, namely, work; consequently she made no lament concerning the disgrace which had fallen on the Geiths by one of them having soiled his fingers by touching trade; nay, rather she told her nephew how proud she was of him, and how she wished that such a son had been given unto her.

Then came George's opportunity. "I think, aunt," he said, "you have every cause to be proud of the son you possess. I do not know where you would find a handsomer, or franker, or more generous fellow than Mark," and the accountant, all unconscious of the stab he was giving, turned towards the woman who had chosen a child at random to pass off as her own, and found, when it was too late, she had chosen nothing strong, nor great, nor clever, but only a person very like his most ordinary neighbours, of whom his best friend could find little to say in his praise, save that he was "handsome, and frank, and generous."

What commendation! Why even a drivelling fool might have been so described without any breach of truth.

"You have seen him lately?" asked Lady Geith.

"This morning," George answered. "I slept last night at Snareham Castle."

"And you come here from him? on his behalf I mean," added Lady Geith.

"I come here, first, to see you," answered George, "and in the second place, to talk about Mark. He is very unhappy, aunt. He stands in a most uncomfortable position."

"It was his own free choice getting into it," said Lady Geith, coldly.

"That probably does not add to his comfort," replied her nephew, "and really in the matter which is the principal cause of disagreement between you, I do not think Mark much to blame. It is indeed rather to his credit to have chosen a portionless girl. Would you not rather see him marry for love, than marry for money?"

"I would rather not see him marry at all," retorted her ladyship, with such sharp suddenness that her tone struck George mute. "And what is more," she went on, "if I can prevent it he shall not marry, either."

"Do you mean to say," asked her nephew, "that you want him to remain single all his life, that you wish to see no wife at Snareham, no heir to all that fine estate?"

"I do," she answered, "wives have been the curses of the Geiths; and as for sons, what son has ever succeeded his father in this most wretched family?"

"Mark," was George's reply to this question, and as he replied, Lady Geith rose and walked up and down the room, pressing her hands to her temples the while.

"True," she said at last, "and I wish he had never succeeded. I wish in this case any one, Arthur Geith, you, or even a stranger, were now at Snareham in his stead. He would be happier working as you have done; he would be better without his title, without his properties. What has been his life since he came into possession? Who have been his companions; what his pursuits? Did he tell you how he has wasted his substance; how he has gambled; how he has lost on horses; how he has hampered himself with debts that he can never pay off in his lifetime; and how, with as fine an estate as any of its class in England, he is yet very little better than a beggar?"

"But, aunt, consider how he was brought up," urged George. "Was there anything he wanted, his father did not let him have? Was he ever taught the value of money? Was he ever shown that property has its responsibilities as well as its advantages? that

a man, even if he be a baronet, is scarcely free to do just what he likes with his own? I do not think Mark is to blame for not practising what he never learnt."

"What I ought to have taught him, I suppose, you mean," remarked Lady Geith.

"What some one ought, most certainly," answered her nephew, boldly. "His father, at any rate. Mark has, however, now learnt dearly what might have been taught him once cheaply; and it seems to me there is no use in blaming him for past errors, if he be willing to reform in the future. Surely marriage ought to make him more careful, for he would then have another's interests to consider as well as his own."

"I have told you I will not have him marry," repeated Lady Geith.

"You must pardon me, aunt, for saying that no human being has a right to prevent a man marrying if he choose."

"Let him marry then," retorted Lady Geith. "Though I do not wish him to marry, though I believe he will bring misery on himself if he do marry, I shall not prevent his doing so."

"But he cannot marry without your help," said the accountant.

"Which I am not bound to give," was the lady's decided reply.

"Then, virtually, you are determined that he shall never have wife, nor child, nor home worthy the name," observed George, after a short silence.

"He has determined that for himself by his own conduct," said Lady Geith, "by his extravagance and

by his folly. For a man in his position to fall in love with a penniless girl is absurd."

"Then you would like him to marry for money?" questioned George.

"I should like him to face his affairs, to retrench, to rely on himself for once. Do you know what his debts are, George?" she asked suddenly; "how much he has to live on after paying life insurance, and interest, and so forth?"

"I have not the faintest idea," replied her nephew.

"Something under fifteen hundred a year," she answered. "A fine income that on which to marry and keep up Snareham and a town house. He wants me to help him clear the property, but I cannot and will not do anything of the kind. It is unreasonable to expect it. You see yourself I should be mad to risk my fortune in such a way; for he would never continue to pay his life insurances were I his creditor. He would only go and contract fresh debts, and live more extravagantly than ever."

She was certainly throwing new light on the subject. George's business head saw at once what Mark could never have been made to comprehend, viz., that if Lady Geith cleared Snareham with her own money, she would certainly want bread before she died; and as he could urge no course upon her tending to such a result, he broke new ground, and remarked —

"At any rate, aunt, you might receive Miss Hayles, and see what you think of her."

"To what purpose?" asked her ladyship, who had by this time resumed her seat and her composure. I should be raising false hopes, and giving my coun-

tenance to a match which cannot take place. Mark must give up the girl."

"He has gone too far to be able to do anything of the kind," answered George a little impatiently. "And if you were to see Miss Hayles, I do not think you would marvel at his choice."

"Were she as beautiful as Venus, and as fascinating as a syren, it could make no difference to me," returned his aunt. "I shall not help Mark to entangle himself further."

"Still, aunt, if you will not see Miss Hayles, will you not be reconciled to Mark? He is very unhappy about the unfortunate differences that have parted you; he is very sorry for his conduct. For my sake, aunt, will you let him come here and speak for himself. It is the first great request I have ever made to you. Will you grant it?"

"Yes; if you will grant me one in return," said Lady Geith, after a moment's pause; "if you will come to me for what money you may require in your business, either as gift or loan, I shall not refuse to forgive Mark some sentences which, however, I can never forget. Name what sum you like, one thousand or ten, and you shall have it to-morrow before two o'clock."

My reader, my dear business reader, listen to this offer, and think what a temptation it must have proved to George Geith; so insidiously proffered, too, as loan or gift; as loan, which, if prosperous and proud, he could repay; as gift, which, if he failed, need never trouble his memory more.

Ten thousand pounds! see you not at the words — warehouses stocked, ships freighted, shops filled?

Knowing what you have done with your poor little capital, with your mere bagatelle of four or five hundred sovereigns, does not the bare idea of this wealth bring visions of greatness before you. Multiplying, extending, ramifying? what could you not do with ten thousand pounds? take that first-rate place, the premium asked for which, and the long rent at the back of that, puts it out of your power to do more than think of it now?

You might take it, and advertise freely, and purchase largely, and employ efficient clerks. Great Mammon! what might not you do with ten thousand pounds? and here is a man who can refuse such an offer.

Not for the reason he assigns to Lady Geith that he does not want it; not because he is blind to the power money can give, to even so apparently ready cash a profession as that of an accountant; but simply because of an old, old promise, made to one whose hand will never clasp his again, whose eyes may never welcome him home more!

Ease, competence, wealth, perhaps, as great as Mark's, he saw might be compassed by means of the sum thus offered, but he refused gently and gratefully, so gratefully that Lady Geith's heart was wrung.

"You thank me now, George," she said, constrained to speak by an impulse she could not control. "You thank me now, George. I wonder if the day will come when you will curse me as the worst enemy you ever knew?"

"I shall never do that, aunt, rest assured," George replied. "Even though you should prove my enemy

in the future — though why you should, passes my comprehension — I shall not forget your kindnesses in the past. But now about Mark," he added; "you will see him; I may write, and tell him I have mediated successfully, so far."

"Yes, I will see him," she said it wearily; "understand me clearly, though, George, and make him understand me too. I will see Mark, but I will not assist him; I will not commit an injustice towards another for the sake of helping a man who cannot help himself."

"If you are thinking of me," answered George, who had been waiting to get in this protest all through the interview, "I can only say I have no right nor title to expect anything from you, and that if you made over the whole of your fortune to me to-morrow, I should not touch a penny of it."

"Yes, George, you would," she said, laying her hand on his arm: "for if I left my money to you I should leave you likewise my reasons for doing so, and in that case your promise to your mother would bind you no longer; for even she would not have objected to your taking atonement from a sinner after confession."

Now what could a man say to such a speech as this, more especially such a man as George Geith? Nothing; and accordingly that was what he did say, pressing her hand at the same time in token of farewell.

"So you will not stay for dinner; you are weary of old friends already, and want to run away?" she pleaded.

"I will come some other time," he answered, "when

Mark is here, if you give me leave to do so;" and with that promise he departed, and wended his way from the west to the east — from Piccadilly, gay with lights and carriages, to the darkness of Fen Court, where the trees kept sobbing and moaning over the graves.

CHAPTER XII.

Office Visitors.

THE months went by, spring succeeded to winter, summer to spring, and still George Geith was in Fen Court, doing well.

Save increase of business, time had brought no changes to him worth chronicling. At intervals he had visited his aunt, at intervals likewise he had seen Mark, between whom and his mother a fresh disagreement had arisen soon after Easter, which accelerated Lady Geith's departure for the continent, and caused Sir Mark's final retirement to Snareham Castle, to fell his timber and think over his debts.

The accountant had done some business for his cousin during the winter; showed him clearly how he stood, and how, by changing his mortgages, he might effect a considerable annual saving in interest which, as George wisely remarked, "might be devoted to paying off the principal." In fact, what with the timber which the property could well spare, savings in interest and strict economy in personal expenditure, the accountant considered that the estate might be completely cleared in ten years, and in this view the baronet had at one time cordially agreed. But after the second disagreement with his mother, Sir Mark's

tone changed. Despairing of help from her, the prospect of ten years of economy frightened this spoiled child of fortune.

"I should not care for work," he said. "Hang it! George, take me into partnership and let me make enough to clear off this d—d mortgage. Five or six thousand pounds ought to turn in thirty thousand in no time."

But George shook his head. He knew well enough where a business would soon be, that Mark Geith had any say to.

"Well, use five or six thousand, and give me half profits," said the baronet, who was very much in earnest about the matter.

"There is such a thing in business as losing as well as using," observed his cousin.

"Let us try, at any rate. I should not care about losing," persisted Sir Mark.

"But I should," answered George; and as he said this his mind travelled back over years and years, over the difficulties he had vanquished, the weary lessons he had conned, the hills he had climbed, the long, long road he had traversed solitary and unaided. Given, two men talking on any subject, and how hard, my reader, it is for the one, to imagine what mental picture the conversation presents for the contemplation of the other.

What is it that the eyes, turning towards the past, behold? what is it that the speaker is really thinking about, whilst he talks glibly enough of the matter in hand? His fellow may never know that; for the great dramas of life are acted out by every man and woman among us, with no spectator but One above.

In its sin, in its sorrow, in its despair, in its misery, its patient endurance, and its frantic struggle, humanity is lonely beyond all power of expression.

Where the thorns have entered, where the brambles have torn, where the path has been roughest, where the purpose has faltered, where tears of bitterness have been shed, where hands have been clasped most tenderly, where words of farewell have been spoken, where the poor tired pilgrim has lain down in mortal agony, and sobbed out his despair, who may tell but God?

And if you could only believe this, my reader; if you could only feel that the most commonplace man you meet has acted out in his own way some tragedy, on which his Maker and yours, has looked with interest, I think it would make you more patient towards those who are neither clever nor attractive; more tolerant to all sorts and conditions of men; more pitiful to those who may, for aught you know, have suffered more than the Almighty will ever permit you to suffer; and more indulgent towards those writers who choose their heroes from amongst the men who pass you by in the street, who crowd railway stations, who live plainly and have no story to tell about themselves, though they may have fought battles, and faced dangers, and passed through troubles, that have made them strong in the sight of God.

Weary and long was the road George Geith had travelled in order to reach comparative success. Looking back, he could not but shudder at the light way in which Mark spoke of losing a game which was bread, and meat, and clothing to himself. If Sir Mark had known anything of work, anything of business,

loss and success would not have seemed a mere game of pitch-toss with fortune.

The more money he made, the larger his connection grew; the higher the stake he was playing for, the more cautious George Geith became in business, the more earnestly he buckled to his work; and he would just as soon have thought of intrusting the management of his affairs to a lunatic, as of suffering his cousin to have any voice in the disposal of his profits, any finger in the business-pie. He knew, if he did, Sir Mark would soon have out all the plums; and for this reason, if for no other, he resolutely declined all the baronet's proposals; which, though at first made jestingly, came in the end to be spoken in serious earnest by the younger man.

The natural result followed, and by degrees Sir Mark forgot his way to Fen Court, and forgot likewise to ask his cousin so frequently to Snareham.

"I think I know what he is doing," said the accountant, looking out on the trees before his window, which were now green and leafy with the early summer foliage; "I know what he is doing; he is cutting off the entail."

And the accountant was right. Sir Mark Geith was cutting off the entail, and George could not raise a finger to prevent him.

Thus the man who dwelt in the City, and who laboured there, found himself, for the second time in his life, quite alone. But as it is one thing for a person to leave his friends, and quite another for his friends to leave him, George Geith felt more lonely now than he had done in the days when he was

Gregory Grant, struggling for liberty, struggling for bread.

He saw that he might live the life of dependence and pleasure, or the life of independence and business; but that he could not combine business and pleasure, and in a dim kind of way he began to understand what puzzles most people till they have dwelt in the Castle of Indolence, and scrambled for daily bread in the hard fields of labour; namely, why so broad a line of demarcation separates the two classes; why pleasure cannot away with business, and why business scowls at pleasure.

Now socially came the time of trial for this busy man; now with Snareham fading from his view, with the old doors closed against him, came an hour when George Geith asked himself whether — seeing man cannot for ever live alone — he had not better make the best of his business connection, and seek his future acquaintances amongst those who were travelling the same road as himself.

If the one land held no welcome for him, why should he not turn his face to the other? He had chosen: he was of business — busy. Let him greet those whose leisure moments were rare also! He was of the City — cityish. Why should he not make friends of those who passed their days under the shadow of the dragon and the grasshopper: and swear allegiance to the magnates of Cockaigne?

Here was a point where cross roads met; along which would he turn? Should he take business for his end; Mammon for his god; a wife with a little money, and a great deal of vulgarity, for his helpmate, and her connections for his for evermore? Or should

he use business as a means, worship Mammon, but moderately, and either live single all his life long, or wait for such a wife as he would have chosen in the old days gone by?

Which should he select: a life with something in it beside the City and the Three per Cents. or an existence like that of hundreds of business men, who are sufficiently well off to be uninteresting, and so thoroughly content and self-satisfied that the most daring of authors would never venture to put them in a book?

Would he turn at this point, or go on straight as hitherto — which? We shall see.

Had the men he met been the same at home as they were in their offices; had the women who were wives and daughters to the City folks, with whom he was brought in contact, been anything like as presentable as their husbands, and brothers, George Geith might have rested where he was for ever; but as it was, so it was. Every prejudice, every taste, every feeling of the man rose up in revolt against the manners and habits of the people, who asked him to come and be one with them; and he drew himself further back into his shell, refusing to be lured forth by such wiles as theirs. He would not run down to Brighton from Saturday till Monday. He could not spare time to visit Hastings; he dined once or twice at suburban houses, where the material silver was very good, but where the manners of his hosts and hostesses were only very lightly plated with social electrotypes. He was very shy of the Bemmidges' hospitality, and cleverly fenced off Mrs. Bemmidge's invitations for him to join their party to the theatre, or the opera, and to

the Zoological Gardens. She had got some tickets from a share-holder for Sunday admission, and she wanted Mr. Geith to hear the band; but Mr. Geith declined. He was engaged for the day, he said, and so he was. At St. Helen's church in the morning, and in Fen Court and on the Tower Wharf in the afternoon.

It was a mighty lonely existence, and there are few who would not have sunk in its waters to something worse.

There was one habit Mrs. Bemmidge had contracted, since that unhappy Christmas dinner, which the accountant could not endure, viz., that of coming to his office to press her invitations in person.

She had him at a disadvantage there. She was a woman, and he could not ask her to go out; and very often it was evident she would not go until she carried her point. Moreover, she could answer his objections and bear down his excuses. Altogether it was a proceeding George detested. Had she come on business, with a set of books to balance, an estate to be wound up, a schedule to be prepared, or even her housekeeping bills to be examined and added up, George would have forgiven her; but to bring her petticoats, and not only her own petticoats, but those of her mother and sister, into his office, to scatter his papers, to ask to sit down, if he was out; to take possession of his chairs, and walk up and down that sacred inner office, as though the fact of her sex gave her title deeds of his possessions — the practice was unendurable, objectionable in the extreme.

In the first place, it was very inconvenient; in the second, it did not look well; and George Geith thought

a man in business ought to be more careful about appearances than even Cæsar's wife.

Under the infliction he chafed, and, though he had been a clergyman, swore:

"What the deuce does the woman mean by it," he thought. "I wonder Bemmidge allows her. If I were married, I would not suffer my wife to enter my office, let alone go into any other man's. It is not only a confounded nuisance, but it is also improper."

Which very likely it seemed to him, though it did not to the lady, who was only, in her own eyes, doing her duty both by Mr. Geith and her sister. She wanted to get the one settled, and the other out into a little pleasant society; and, as Mr. Geith would not come to the mountain, why, there was nothing for it but for the mountain to go to him.

Wherefore she often penetrated to Fen Court, and many and many a time compelled him to accept her invitations in order to get rid of her. Had the accountant been a weak man, he would have married Gertrude to get rid of the family; but he was strong and not over sensitive, for which reasons he finally gave orders to Mr. Foss, always to tell Mrs. Bemmidge he was engaged.

"No matter what I am doing, I shall be busy the whole day; and if I am out, you don't expect me in at all, remember."

"Yes, sir. And Mr. Bemmidge?"

"I shall see him, unless Mrs. Bemmidge, or Miss Gilling be with him; but I cannot, and will not, be pestered with women, unless they come on business."

"Pestered with women," that was the way this man spoke of the sex for which Mr. Foss had an un-

bounded reverence. If he had had an office, and Miss Gilling had come there with a friend, what would he not have done for her?

He would have let business go to the dogs; he would have stirred the fire in the winter; opened the window in summer; gone away with her for the afternoon; accepted her sister's invitations with rapture.

As it was, he could but obey the instructions of his principal in the office, and, in the course of a walk towards Crouch End, with Miss Gilling, suffer that young lady to pump the order he had received, out of him. Afterwards Mr. Foss could have bitten a piece off his tongue for the indiscretion, but that would have done no good; and Miss Gilling was so kind as to take no notice of his words.

But she stored the grievance up, and nursed what she considered the insult offered to her, even while she still went to Fen Court with her sister, and took chance of finding Mr. Geith at home.

He was at home, and busy, one summer's afternoon when Mrs. Bemmidge tapped at his door.

His clerks were both out, the one at the West and the other at the Bank, so that he had to answer the summons himself, after which there was, of course, no retreat.

"So we have caught you at last," said Mrs. Bemmidge, as she sailed into the room in all the glory of a figured peach barège, a light shawl, and a pink bonnet. Miss Gilling, cool and bewitching, in a straw bonnet trimmed with primrose-coloured riband, a black scarf, and a blue muslin dress. Mamma's queen accompanied the pair, perhaps as a duenna, and at once

took off her head-gear, to Mr. Geith's intense dismay.

"Oh! ma, ain't it 'ot in here?" said the sweet child; and hot it certainly was, with not a window open, and the sun shining with all its might against the glass.

"It is very warm," acquiesced mamma; and she sat down and fanned herself with *The Times* newspaper.

"I cannot offer to open the windows," remarked Mr. Geith with a grim feeling of satisfaction, "for there is a breeze, and the letters get blown about in all directions."

"I am sure it is no wonder you are ill," said Mrs. Bemmidge, "sitting writing in this close room from morning till night."

"You are very kind, but I am not ill," answered George, who was leaning against his desk.

"It is of no use your telling *me* that," observed Mrs. Bemmidge, as though she were gifted with some special power of divination; "any one can tell you are ill by looking in your face. I declare I should scarcely know you since last Christmas; you will have a serious illness, mark my words, Mr. Geith, if you are so careless of your health; Mr. Bemmidge has been quite unhappy about you lately. He says you are killing yourself by inches. It was only last night he was lamenting you would not go out of town. Was not it, Gertrude?"

"Miss Gilling confirmed her sister's statement. It was a peculiarity of this pair, as it seems to be of many, that the one never appeared to think her state-

ment would be credited unless the other swore to its truth.

"My brother-in-law," said Miss Gilling, modestly, "talks about you every night."

"I am extremely obliged to Mr. Bemmidge," said George, thinking at the same time how short that gentleman must be of interesting subjects of conversation.

"And he was saying," went on Mrs. Bemmidge, "that if you would come and stop with us for a week or two the change of air might do you good. We are almost in the country; and at any rate it would be better for you than this hot, stifling oven."

Having finished which neat little speech, Mrs. Bemmidge laid down *The Times* and untied her bonnet-strings.

"You really are too kind," answered the accountant; "I am not worth all the trouble you take in my behalf; and besides," he added, "I really am not ill. I am perfectly well, and the heat of this place does not affect me as it seems to do you; on the contrary, I am perfectly cool and comfortable;" and Mr. Geith, standing in the full glare of the afternoon sun, made this statement with self-possession and composure.

"Well, if you are cool here," said Mrs. Bemmidge, "I do not think you would be too warm in Calcutta."

"I do not think I should," replied George, and he laughed as he said it.

"But whether you feel the closeness of this place or not," persisted Mrs. Bemmidge, "it must affect your health. What with the smoke, and the heat, and the want of ventilation —"

"Pray be just, Mrs. Bemmidge," interrupted George,

"there is Billiter Square on the east, the churchyard on the west. Two lungs, two large, open spaces; what more would you have?"

"A churchyard, poison!" exclaimed Mrs. Bemmidge. "Breathing one's father and mother, as Mr. Bemmidge says."

"I believe," observed Mr. Geith, mildly, "that Fen churchyard was closed before my father and mother were in existence."

"Really, Mr. Geith, you are as hard to persuade as — as —"

"As men are generally," he supplied.

"As a woman, papa tells mamma," broke in Mrs. Bemmidge's queen, who had been amusing herself with sketching a house on the back of a carefully prepared balance-sheet, and drew by her remark, attention to her employment.

"Gracious, child! what have you done?" exclaimed Mrs. Bemmidge, as George snatched the paper from before her, and placed it on his desk, with an expression on his face which was not pleasant. "I hope she has done no harm. I declare, miss, you shall never come out with me again. You naughty girl! how many times am I to tell you never to touch anything without permission?" and therewith, full of virtuous indignation, mamma, regardless alike of loosened bonnet, and unfastened shawl, arose and shook her queen, who lifted up her voice and wept.

"Oh! for Heaven's sake, Mrs. Bemmidge, don't let her cry here," entreated the accountant. "Do be quiet, child, there is some one coming up the stairs."

To George's great relief it was only the postman, but the incident decided him to get rid of Mrs. Bem-

midge at any cost. To have a child (a devil he mentally called it), shrieking in his office, to have punishment, however necessary and satisfactory, inflicted in his own private sanctum within earshot of all the other men who carried on business in the house — the thing was unendurable; and if quiet was only to be purchased by more frequent visits to Ivy Cottage, why to Ivy Cottage he would go. Short of insulting Mr. Bemmidge and quarrelling with the whole connection, the accountant saw no other way out of the maze he had unhappily got into — and quarrelling was against his creed. He never knew where an enemy might do him harm, nor when a friend might benefit him.

By this time Mrs. Bemmidge had readjusted her bonnet, and, with Miss Gilling's help, got on her shawl; she had also recovered sufficient breath to apologize to Mr. Geith for Amy's misdeeds, and to hope the mischief she had done was not irreparable.

"I shall have to copy it out again, but that will not take very long," said the accountant, somewhat ruefully. "The child did not know she was doing any harm, so I hope you will say no more to her about it."

"I trust she will be grateful for your kindness, and prove it by behaving better another time." Mr. Geith groaned inwardly. "I am sure I am obliged to you for taking it so well. And now will you not come to us? You shall have breakfast whatever hour you like in the morning; you shall come and go as you choose; Mr. Bemmidge will be delighted, and I really think the change of air would be of immense benefit to you."

"I am sorry to say, Mrs. Bemmidge, it is impos-

sible," answered George; "I have to work here sometimes up to two and three o'clock in the morning; I never can tell from one day to another how much leisure I shall have, or whether I shall have any. I cannot go to stay with you; but if you will allow me to take tea with you some evening —"

"Allow you!" broke in Mrs. Bemmidge, "when you know we shall be only too glad to see you. But some evening is no evening. When will you come, Mr. Geith?"

"I think I can spend an hour or two to-morrow," he answered; "if anything prevents my going, I will call round in Nicholas Lane."

"But you will not let anything prevent you; you will come if you can?"

"I will indeed, thank you," and George bowed the trio out, and then, inwardly fuming, returned to his desk. Though he had told Mrs. Bemmidge he was cool, the heat of his room almost suffocated him, and so, after lifting the letter just brought in, he retired into his back office, where, flinging down the window and leaning out to drink the cool breeze, as a thirsty man might water, he read the following epistle, which, though proceeding ostensible from Mr. Molozone, was written by a lady:

"Dower House, Molozone Park,
Withefell, near Wattisbridge,
June 25, 1848.

"DEAR SIR, — Long and severe illness has prevented my seeing you since my return from Cornwall.

"I now write to say that the affairs of the Sythlow Mining Co. have assumed such an aspect as to neces-

sitate immediate attention to my own. As you anticipated, I find I shall require help in their arrangement, and I should therefore feel obliged if you would come down here at your earliest convenience, the state of my health rendering it impossible for me to visit London for the present. As we are seven miles from a station I must beg you to name a day and train most suitable to yourself, and I will have a conveyance to meet you at the St. Margaret's station on the Eastern Counties line. — I am, dear Sir, yours very truly,

“A. A. MOLOZANE.”

George Geith read this letter through twice, then, still leaning out of the window, he thought over his engagements for the week, and concluded that if he were to go to Wattisbridge at all, he could not choose a better day than the morrow. If he did go, he should get rid of Mrs. Bemmidge's invitation; get rid at once of her and Miss Gilling and the children, baby included, whom he detested. Moreover, he would probably have a fine day for his journey, and he should get a glimpse of the country, and breathe perfectly pure air, not City, not suburban, but perfectly pure, sweet air among fields in which the mowers were busy. He would go; and, having arrived at this decision, Mr. Geith returned to his desk, where, after first duly consulting Bradshaw, he wrote to Mr. Molozone, informing him that he would, next day, be at St. Margaret's by the train which was due there at 2.55.

He then finished his other letters, and, when his clerk returned, put on his hat and went down to Nicholas Lane to tell Mr. Bemmidge he was unexpectedly called out of town, and should consequently

be unable to fulfil his engagement for the following evening.

"I am glad you are going out of town, even though we shall not see you," said Andrew Bemmidge, as he shook the accountant's hand. "What part of the world are you bound for?"

"Hertfordshire," was Mr. Geith's wide answer.

"Ah! a sweet country, more particularly about Watford and Bushy; hope you will enjoy yourself."

"I am going on business," said George, "and there is never much enjoyment to be had out of that."

"Faith, I don't know," answered Mr. Bemmidge; "one would think you must find some fun in business, or you would not stick so close to it."

"I am sticking close now, that I may rest hereafter," was the reply.

"That's all stuff," said the wine merchant. "I dare say you think at present you will rest in the future, but I know better; I know men like you work, work, work, till they die or go mad."

"Delightful prospect," observed the accountant; and as he walked away he thought how little Mr. Bemmidge really knew about him.

Rather, however, was it not George Geith who knew nothing really about himself; in time as well as in eternity is it not true that what men are, that they remain? Are not the lazy, lazy still — the untruthful, liars always; and does not the man who works hard at thirty generally continue to work so long as his arm retains its strength, and his right hand her cunning?

CHAPTER XIII.

In the Country.

LEAVING the train at St. Margaret's, Mr. Geith looked around for the conveyance Mr. Molozane had mentioned would be awaiting his arrival; but as there was nothing of the kind to be seen — not even a light cart — the accountant concluded either that this letter had miscarried, or that his notice was too short to enable the fortunate holder of shares in the Sythlow Mining Co. to fulfil his promise.

Assuredly there was no vehicle of any sort waiting to convey him to Molozane Park, and accordingly the accountant had to decide which of three courses to pursue, viz., whether he should return to town, wait at St. Margaret's till some one appeared on behalf of Mr. Molozane, or proceed to his destination as best he might.

"It is seven miles to Withefell, is it not?" he asked of a porter when he had satisfied himself there was no one to meet him.

"A good seven miles, sir, by the road to ride; but if you mean to walk, there is a footpath turns off to the right after you get through Wattisbridge, which cuts off a corner and makes the distance not more than four or four and a half miles."

"What is Wattisbridge — a town?"

"No, sir, only a bit of a village, with a few houses round the green, and a tavern and two or three shops."

"And Withefell?"

"Withefell is nothing but a row of small cottages. If it was not for the Hall, there would be no Withefell at all."

"What hall do you mean?"

"Withefell Hall, sir, where Lord Austin used to live. It's a Mr. Finch has it now. It lay vacant for many and many a year. I can remember it well, for I was born and brought up at Wattisbridge."

"Do you know Molozane Park?" asked Mr. Geith.

"Yes, it is on the other side of Withefell, a full half mile beyond it; Mr. Werne lives there. He will be out by the next train."

"I thought Mr. Molozane lived at the Park?"

"No, sir — not now. He has left it this three years, I suppose. He's gone to the Dower House, as it is called, which stands on the side of the property nearest Withefell. The Park belongs to Mr. Molozane, and Mr. Werne rents it of him."

"And is the path you mentioned my nearest way to the Dower House?"

"Yes sir," keep straight on for about a mile till you come to a road to your left hand, which takes you through the wood over Hertford Heath. Then go across the common, and never turn till you get to Wattisbridge. If you take the first field path to your right after you get through Wattisbridge, it will bring you out nearly opposite Mr. Molozane's."

"Is there any hotel at Wattisbridge — any place I could stay at for the night, if I cannot get back here?"

"There is a very good tavern, sir, the 'Stag.' It is not exactly an hotel, but it is a very good wayside inn. Mr. Elsenham stops there when he is not at the Dower House; and his groom and horses always stay at the 'Stag.'"

"And who may Mr. Elsenham be?" asked George.

"Mr. Molozone's nephew. He is down here six months out of the twelve. Should you like your bag sent over to Wattisbridge, sir. I can get it taken, if you please."

Of course, George pleased. He was only too glad to be rid of it, and accordingly after duly feeing the porter, both for his information and his services, he started in the full blaze of the afternoon sun, on his way to Withefell.

Over the little hill, due west, he went, and then along a road bordered by limes and elms, and nut-trees, between which he caught glimpses of a country fair and rich, and undulating. It was so hot that a purple mist seemed to enfold the distant parts of the landscape. There was a strange calm in everything round and about him. No breeze stirred among the trees, the birds were not singing, the cattle were lying in shady corners of the fields. The mowers seemed to have finished their work, for the grass was down, and the hay in ricks. The dust lay thick on the roads, but there was no wind to stir it. Scarcely a vehicle passed by George Geith, as he wended his way along. He could not walk fast, the heat was too intense for that, but as he paced slowly on his way, looking at the country through which he passed, he felt it a very blessed thing to get out of London even for a few hours, to be greeted and caressed and kissed by nature, who was decked out in such glorious apparel, to receive her prodigal. He had not been so far out of town in the summer time for years; he had almost forgotten what the country was like in summer, till he came to see it now with its hedgerows festooned with roses, its trailing brambles twined with honeysuckle; its banks

softly cushioned with moss; its fields stretching far away into the distance, whilst high above all was the calm blue sky, over which floated a few light fleecy clouds.

Dwellers in the country do not know how the sight thereof affects those who dwell in towns. They who have the turf and the fields, and the trees and the flowers always, cannot imagine what sharpened senses gaze every now and then on Nature, bask in her loveliness, drink in her perfumes, hearken to her music.

To many a citizen, to look on the country in summer is to come fresh on a new creation. The blades of grass, the hyacinths growing in the woods, the long shadows of the trees lying on the turf beneath, the call of the blackbird, the song of the thrush, the babbling of tiny brooks, the pebbles at the bottom of some clear rivulet, the white roads winding off to distant villages and hamlets; these things, which, it may be, the countryman never notices, because he is amongst them always, are, to the dweller in towns, so marvellously beautiful, so unutterably soothing, that he cannot tell his neighbour how they affect him, for even very shallow people sometimes dare not talk about what touches them most; and how that summer landscape touched George Geith, I could scarcely, my reader, be able to explain.

I only know that all that was noble and good and pure in the man's hard nature was brought out by the sight of the country, and the trees, and the grass; never to speak of the stillness, a stillness which he occasionally stopped to hear, if the paradox may be allowed. On he went, on past field and copse and hedge-row, on through the wood and across the common, till

at last he came to Wattisbridge, a thoroughly old-fashioned village, where the "Stag" hung out its sign under the shadow of two glorious chestnuts, and large red-brick houses were scattered round the green.

Away to the left lay the parish church, its square towers showing grey and massive against the trees in the graveyard. Over the gate George leant for a minute, looking at the diamond-paned windows, and the ancient porch, and the head-stones, some white, some moss-grown, on which the summer sun was shining.

Many a year the accountant lived over again as he leant on the gate and looked on the graves before him. Many a memory he had thought dead and buried, too, arose from its coffin and stared him in the face. Pictures of the past came crowding into his mind, filling his mental gallery full to overflowing. He saw another church, another graveyard, the faces of the loved and lost, the hopes and the sorrows, of many and many a day departed. He, almost another man as it seemed to him, looked back on what he had been, and conjugated again by the light of memory "to suffer," the only verb he had ever learnt thoroughly. He looked back, another man as I have said, on the being and doing and suffering of his former self; looked back, as such men do, calmly and dispassionately at the trials of that other George Geith whom he had once been.

There was no self-pity, no regret, no pain, but there was recollection, such recollection as will come every now and then even to the hearts of men who work hard and think little.

And with olden memories still overlying the

realities of his present existence, he turned aside from the churchyard and pursued his way to Whitefell.

If he enjoyed the first portion of his walk, the latter proved more enjoyable still. He was by this time in the field path which led straight away from Wattisbridge to the Dower House. He trod on the cool grass; he passed close by flocks of sheep; he stood to watch the lambs, who, all tails and legs, scudded away to their mothers at his approach. He passed by shaded ponds where the cattle stood knee-deep in the cool waters. He rested on this stile and on that, and looked down into the hollows where young plantations were springing up, or off to the far horizon where the purple haze lay heavy on the dark green trees.

He had come from a place where, as I have before said, time flies; where it is express pace year after year; where we may, indeed, travel the miles of our three-score year and ten pilgrimage, but where those miles seem short and unsatisfactory, because of the pace at which we go. We look at something in the present, and behold, before we can look again, the past has seized it. We throw down the sovereigns that make up the sum of our lives to Time, and as he gathers them, he gives us scanty change for the treasures cast away. While the train by which we travel sweeps through life, quiet country nooks, or world-forgotten stations, meet our aching eyes, and we feel it would be pleasant to break the journey at some of them, and rest awhile, before proceeding further towards that mighty terminus where the black coach is waiting our arrival, to bear us into the "silent land."

Great stretches of upland; woods lying still and

green in the summer's soft evening light; grey mountains reflected from the winter's sky, rivers with mossy banks overshadowed by ancient trees, moors covered with the purple heather, quiet streams rippling lazily against rock and stone, sheltered bays where the waves steal slowly and gently up on the sand — these are the places where our lost hours have taken up their abode.

Backward and forward they flit softly over the upland, in the depths of the woods they are lying asleep, they climb the sides of the great mountains, and rest under the crags; they look into the darksome pools, lurk in the blue-bells, rest among the heather; they are dreaming by the sides of the streams, and looking with half-closed eyes out on the calm summer sea. If we want them, if we would recover the moments and the days, and the years stolen from out our lives, it is in these places we must seek them.

The two hours George Geith had taken for his leisurely walk, would have passed in town almost without his noticing their flight; but in the country it seemed to him as though he had lived a little life on the road between St. Margaret's and Withefell.

He was near the end of his journey now. He was crossing the last field which separated him from the plantations of Molozane Park. At the end of the field was a stile, and beyond that a short path, led through the wood, to the highway beyond.

Before he left the field, George turned to look back on the way he had come. He stood on a slight rising ground, and was able to see over miles of country. Here a house, there a farm-yard; gently sloping hills crowned with clumps of trees.

To the east and south he gazed for a few minutes, like a man looking his last on something he might never see with the same feelings more, and then he pursued his way towards the north-west, whither he was bound.

As he neared the stile, he perceived on the other side of it a group, which he stopped to contemplate. Since he left Wattisbridge he had met no person except an old shepherd; and the little picture which was now on view at the entrance of the wood, had therefore all the charm of novelty for him.

Through the trees the afternoon sun shone brightly on the turf; down a grassy glade his path lay straight, a path shaded by branches that wound their arms together to make the great cathedral arch, from whence all other cathedral arches have been copied; whilst for foreground, George's picture had a young girl, a black retriever, and a white poodle.

The girl occupied the lowest step of the stile, the retriever sat on his haunches beside her, gravely watching the performances of the poodle, which was standing on its hind legs, and balancing a piece of biscuit on its pink nose. So deeply interested did the trio appear in the last-mentioned feat, that George had time to notice the flow of the lady's dress; the cool-looking plain check ribands with which her bonnet was trimmed, a slit in her parasol, the very colour of the hair which peeped from beneath her bonnet curtain, before his own approach was observed.

"You may have it now," said the girl, at last, and thereupon the poodle threw the piece up in the air, caught it, came down to earth, ate his reward, and took up his position on his hind legs once more.

"All done," observed his mistress, and she swept the crumbs off her dress on the ground. "Why, what is the matter, Royal?" and, looking round to see what the dog was growling at, she beheld Mr. Geith standing on the other side of the stile, looking at her.

Brown eyes, a blushing face, a hand laid on the dog's head, a smile which would, but for the fact of his being an utter stranger, have been a laugh, a sweet, young, fresh voice saying —

"I am afraid we have been in your way. Royal will not bite."

That was all. He had seen, he had heard, he had raised his hat, he had passed, and left the group behind.

As he walked down the glade, thinking how much better girls look in the country than in town, how much space in which to see a picture adds to its effect, how much more noticeable that pretty creature he had just disturbed was surrounded by trees and fields, than many another far prettier young lady he had seen in London — the notion never entered George Geith's mind that that stile, that girl, that grave retriever, that ridiculous poodle had been photographed for his benefit, and that through all the years to come, let them be long, let them be short, that little scene at the entrance of the wood would remain stamped on his mind indelibly. The thought never entered into his head then, that, after many days, he should look at that picture through a mist of tears; that with dim eyes he should see the glory of that summer sun flickering before him; that his heart would ache at the thought of that day as it had never ached before; that all hardness should die out of his nature when memory brought

back that upturned face, and that before the great misery of his future he should lie down like a coward refusing to battle more.

Ah, me! hard though George Geith might be, unpitying as he was, I know that could he have foreseen what the future held for him and for her, he would have turned on his path, and, leaving the woods and the fields and the sweet country air, have gone back to his City drudgery again like a Spartan.

He would have taken the sunshine out of his own life to save the clouds from darkening down on hers. He would have left the dear face to smile on still, the guileless heart to throb calmly. He would have left his day without a noon to prevent night closing over hers. He would have known it was possible for him to love so well that he should become unselfish; and for her sake, for the sake of the girl he had seen only for a moment, he would have opened the volume of his life and written "Blank" across every page to come.

But as it was, so it was; and all unconscious of what the future was holding for him, George Geith walked along the path, through the glade, under the shadow of arching trees, straight as he could go to meet his destiny.

CHAPTER XIV.

New Acquaintances.

WHEN George Geith reached the end of the path he looked back, as was, perhaps, only natural; but the girl and her companions were gone.

Once he got into the high road, however, he saw mistress and dogs behind him, the former walking beside a lady on horseback, the latter demurely pacing through the dust.

Not being perfectly sure as to whether a certain red brick mansion, which he saw before him in the distance, might be the Dower House or not, the accountant walked slowly on, so slowly that horse and rider, and flowing muslin dress and canine attendants, all passed him before he was halfway to the entrance gates.

As she walked by, the younger of the two ladies glanced towards him with a look of semi-recognition, whilst the retriever was so obliging as to turn his head and look solemnly in the stranger's face. Somewhat ungratefully, George bestowed his attention on neither; but fixed it on the equestrian, who was undeniably handsome, and graceful to boot. She rode a beautiful horse, a creature which seemed so proud of itself, and of her, that it scarcely knew what to do for very vanity.

It arched its neck, it seemed dancing as it walked, it touched the ground daintily with its hoofs, as though afraid of soiling them. Its tail was not still for one second, and it champed at the bits and looked down, as if it were contemplating its chest, and thinking how smooth and bright and glossy was its skin.

As for the rider, George had never seen so beautiful a woman; dark hair, dark eyes, small regular features, dainty hands that held the reins lightly, a figure that seemed to sway and bend with every movement of the horse, and last but not least an expression so haughty that it seemed to ignore the humble pedestrian and refused to notice him even by a glance.

Well, he did not want her to notice him; he merely wanted liberty to look, and he did look long after she had passed, long after he could see her face, when it was only possible for him to observe the graceful swaying of her slight lithe figure.

Then he waited for the groom to come up that he might ask him the way to the Dower House.

"Mr. Molozane's," suggested the man; "that is the place, just before you; the drive is about a hundred yards further; but as you're a-foot you can go in by the green gate and straight up to the hall-door;" and having vouchsafed this piece of information, the speaker, who had stopped to give it, put his horse to a trot after his mistress.

"A somewhat fast groom for a young lady," thought George, as he followed the man with his eye.

He had seen so much of servants in the earlier part of his life, that he knew at once the lady's attendant was not one he should have selected; and he walked on to the Dower House marvelling who the lady might be, and why the man had looked so intelligent when he asked for the Dower House.

"I wonder if she is Mr. Molozane's daughter," he thought, whilst he unfastened the little gate, and made his way between hedges of evergreens to the house.

"A pretty place," was his next reflection, as the walk bore suddenly to the right, bringing him at once from amongst the evergreens, and in front of the hall-door. "A place I should not mind living in if I had seven or eight thousand a year," and after he had knocked, he stood looking over the undulating grounds, and thick plantations, and broad acres of Molozone Park, of which property the Dower House was merely a little dependency.

It had been the residence of the dowager ladies of Molozone for a hundred years or more. Widows had retired there when another queen came to reign at the park: sisters had lived there in state, till another widow claimed it, or they left it for homes of their own. That house had kept the ladies of the Molozone family up almost in their former station when husbands and fathers were dead; but until misfortunes came thick and heavy on the race, it had never been tenanted by a man. Now a man lived in it; sure sign that the name was about to become extinct; a poor, proud man, without a son.

Into this man's presence George Geith was ushered by the servant who answered his summons, and who showed him first into the drawing-room, and afterwards requested him to walk into the library.

There, on a sofa, lay Mr. Molozone, pale with long confinement to the house, weak with recent illness.

He rose as the accountant entered; and with only the slightest trace of his former hauteur, thanked him for his promptitude, but reminded him he had asked to be apprized of his coming.

"I wrote yesterday," George answered.

"I shall have the letter to-morrow morning, then," said Mr. Molozane. "We have but one post a day, and all our letters go first to Hertford and then back to Wattisbridge. It was very kind of you to come so soon. I am sorry, however, that there was no one to meet you at the station."

"Thank you," answered George, quietly; "but I liked the walk from St. Margaret's better than I could possibly have liked the drive. This is a new country to me. I have never been in Hertfordshire before."

"It is pretty," said Mr. Molozane; "at least, I think it so. I know most of the English shires, and yet I fancy no home in any of them could be so pleasant as one amongst the green fields of Hertfordshire;" and, as he spoke, the poor gentleman involuntarily turned towards the window, which commanded a view of the fair estate, that was passing from him and from his so swiftly.

George's eye followed the same direction, and when Mr. Molozane looked round their glances met.

There was no need for the accountant to be told the end. He read that ruin had come; and that the poor, proud, speculative, over-sanguine man, was staring it in the face.

"I went down into Cornwall, Mr. Geith," his host began, after a pause, "and the mine was simply a clay pit. When I looked at it, I could think of nothing but a gigantic grave, dug for the burial of the hearts, and hopes, and fortunes of men like myself. I might as rationally go to Wattisbridge churchyard and ask the dead to rise, as expect anything ever to

come out of the Sythlow Mines, save beggary for me and mine.

"And so," he went on, after a pause, "I have ventured to ask you to look into the actual state of my affairs, and tell me exactly how I stand, and what I ought to do."

"Do you wish me to transact this business here, or in town?" asked the accountant.

"Here," answered Mr. Molozane, "the fact is, I have never been methodical — never kept accounts — or been exact in any way, and I should require always to be at hand to explain the meaning of various entries, and to tell you what money has been paid and is still owing. But we will talk of these things after dinner, Mr. Geith," added Mr. Molozane, rising at the first sound of the dressing-bell, thankful, apparently, for the chance of postponing disagreeable conversation even for a season. "I will send over to St. Margaret's for your luggage," his host went on, as they ascended the staircase side by side. "Of course you had no intention of returning to London to-night?"

"If possible, I should like to do so," George replied.

"But it is not possible," said Mr. Molozane; "and I shall send to St. Margaret's immediately."

"Fearing I might not be able to catch the up train, I told the porter to send on my bag to Wattisbridge. If I cannot get back to St. Margaret's in time, I shall remain at the 'Stag' for the night."

"Excuse me, Mr. Geith," said his host, "but that you shall not; I did not bring a man thirty miles out of his way, and then suffer him to seek his welcome

at an inn. I may not very long have a house to call my own; but that is one reason the more why I should press such poor hospitality as it can offer on those who come to see me. You will stay?"

"You are very good, I will," George answered, and he walked over to the window of the room in which Mr. Molozane left him, with a softened kindly feeling that was a stranger to his heart.

Standing there, he looked out over wood and field, over park and plantation, and wondered how he should feel were he in the shoes of the man who had just left him, and saw all this — name, fortune, position, passing away.

How should he feel, if he stood on the lands of his fathers a mere tenant-at-will, proffering hospitality, which it would not be long in his power to extend, to friend or stranger.

"It would be worse than hanging," thought the accountant; and having arrived at this conclusion, he began to make such improvements in his outward appearance as were possible under the circumstances.

When he had finished, he went down-stairs again, encountering in the hall, first, the white poodle, and then his acquaintance of the stile.

"Are you looking for papa?" asked this young lady, who never under any circumstances seemed to lose the use of her tongue; "he will be ready in a few minutes; perhaps you will come into the drawing-room with me."

Mr. Geith was quite willing to go anywhere with her, and followed his guide into a large apartment, where, seated behind an embroidery frame, he beheld

the lady who had excited his admiration so short a time before.

"My sister," said his companion; "Mr. Geith," supplied George, and the beauty made a slight inclination to the roses on her canvas. She never looked at the stranger; she never vouchsafed him a word.

"Miss Louisa Molozone," was the next introduction, and immediately the oddest little creature Mr. Geith had seen for many a long day, came forward, and shook hands with him, assuring him, with the most imperturbable gravity, that

"She was very glad to see him."

A child in height, a woman in address, a something which might have sorely puzzled any one who did not see her face, which was that of a girl of about fourteen, who wore a cap with a close border, in which rows of narrow ribbon were placed at intervals.

A little original, with a wistful, old-fashioned expression in her countenance, who, with perfect self-possession, and with the grave and unembarrassed courtesy of a matron of fifty, took George under her charge, and began to do the honours with all solemnity.

"She feared he must have found it very warm walking from the station; she hoped he was not tired; she was glad he had enjoyed the walk. Beryl had been over at Wattisbridge; she said she had seen him in the wood. And had he noticed Royal and Guess? Guess could stand on his hind legs for any length of time; would march round the room if any one played for him; would drop down dead. Beryl had taught him to faint. He would stand on his hind legs and

then drop backward and lie with his eyes shut till Beryl sprinkled him. Most people," proceeded the oracle, "liked Guess better than Royal, but for her part, she preferred Royal. Royal could fetch and carry. He could take letters to the post-office. If Beryl told him to take care of anything, nobody dare touch it till Beryl herself came back. Beyond all," and this seemed the crowning perfection in the girl's eyes, "there were some people Royal hated, and that he would not come to, for bread or meat or even bones.

"And he likes bones better than beef," finished this Solomon; and she sat silent for a minute as if searching for some cause for so singular a taste.

Meantime, the beauty sat behind her embroidery frame, silent and undemonstrative.

There was something so irritating in her industry that Beryl, looking towards her, reddened, bit her lips, and then rushed into conversation with their guest.

Did he like country, or town the best? Was not Wattisbridge Church very picturesque and pretty? Was it not pleasant walking across the fields to Withefell? She, Miss Beryl Molozone, did not know how any one could live in London. It would break her heart, she was sure, to be poked up in a town.

"It is bad enough staying at grandmamma's," finished the young lady, "and she does not live in town, but in a great stiff house at Kensington. I always feel when I come home again as though I had been let out of prison."

At this point Miss Molozone lifted her eyes from her embroidery, and looked towards her sister. She

did not speak a word, but Beryl understood the look, and answered it.

"If one does not like a place, Matilda, there is no use in saying one does."

"No one asked you, Beryl, to express an opinion about the matter," said the beauty, and that was the first sentence George Geith heard her speak.

"But Beryl always expresses opinions, and Beryl shall do so if she likes," said the aristocrat of fourteen, at which speech even Miss Molozane laughed, for it was not in flesh and blood, to help laughing at the way the girl spoke.

"What is amusing you all?" asked Mr. Molozane, entering the room at the moment.

"We are laughing at Louey, papa," answered his second daughter, vacating the easy-chair she occupied, for his benefit; "she says I am to express what opinions I choose, even though I speak heresy about Kensington. We three will join together and fight for the country, and Mr. Geith and Matilda may defend town if they can."

"I trust you will not imagine I prefer London," exclaimed George a little eagerly. "Were I able to choose my home, I should not remain in it an hour; but if a man be not able to make a selection, it is surely wise for him to think the best he can of the place in which he is compelled to reside."

"Yours is good philosophy, Mr. Geith," said his host, "but I am afraid neither Beryl nor I could carry it into practice."

"And yet," added the Molozane Solomon, "as Mr. Geith puts it, I am sure he is right. I never thought

before, about people not being able to choose for themselves."

"Nine out of ten are chosen for," answered George, as gravely as though he had been speaking to a dowager of seventy. "I do not know many who are free to come, to go, to travel, or stay at home, just as they please. 'Must' seems to be the law of this world, and I do not know but, after all, it is a very wholesome law by which to be governed."

"It may be very wholesome, but it is very stern," said Mr. Molozane, who perhaps was not sorry that the announcement of dinner ended the conversation.

He took charge of his eldest daughter, and Beryl was consequently left to Mr. Geith, who could not help noticing two things on his way to the dining-room; one, the queenly air with which Miss Molozane swept across the hall; and the other, that the youngest sister took hold of Beryl's hand, clasping it in both of hers. That was evidently the manner in which they were accustomed to go about together. Wisdom leaning on Frivolity — Gravity nestling close to Fun.

Quite as a matter of course, Beryl took the head of the table; apparently she was housekeeper, mistress, hostess, for Miss Molozane did nothing.

She did not contribute so much to the general comfort of the party, as even an ordinary guest might have done, for she sat perfectly silent, eating little, touching no wine, making no remark — answering, certainly, when spoken to by her father or sisters, but volunteering no observation of her own.

And yet, for the life of him, George could not avoid admiring her. He would rather have had one word from that statue, than a whole day's talk with

Beryl. She piqued, irritated, and tantalized him. He knew she thought him beneath her notice, and that she disapproved of his presence at table with them. He was perfectly well aware that Miss Molozone did not forget he was a City man, and that she did not consider poor City men fit associates for so superior a being as herself; but still she was the one of the family from whom he most desired a smile. He had always been a slave to beauty; he had generally been regarded kindly by women, and yet here was a woman, who did not care for his admiration, who would rather have resented the idea of any one in his position daring to admire her.

The pretty face had no chance beside the handsome one. Beryl was ready enough to talk to him, to attend to his wants, to keep the conversational ball rolling; but he did not care for Beryl, and was ungrateful enough not to feel thankful for her efforts to amuse him.

Without her, that dinner would have been a wretched meal to every one at the table, for Mr. Molozone was ill and preoccupied, and the youngest born did not contribute very much to the general amusement.

At first George could not comprehend why her father and Beryl were so anxious concerning the state of her appetite, why tit-bits were pressed on her, and wine in quantity poured out for her benefit. He could not understand why a really very tolerable dinner did not seem to satisfy the requirements of her relations, but at last Beryl explained that Louey had been ill of fever in the spring, and that she had never got so strong since as they could desire.

"Weakness seems harder to conquer than absolute

disease," added Mr. Molozane; and he looked at his child as he spoke, with an expression George could not read at the time, though he understood its meaning afterwards.

The cloth was scarcely drawn before the ladies retired, and then George expected that Mr. Molozane would speak to him about his affairs.

No such thing, however; his affairs seemed to be the last topic on which Mr. Molozane desired to touch.

He was not going to spoil the flavour of his wine with business. He was willing to talk on any subject save that which lay nearest his heart. Politics, horses, fishing, shooting, farming, books, about all these things Mr. Molozane conversed freely. Anything except that for which Mr. Geith had come down from London his host was willing to speak of. There had been a time when mines and railways had always been on the tip of his tongue, but that time was past and gone. Mines, and railways, and speculations of all sorts had settled his fortunes; and, like most men who have built, and spent, and been happy upon the possible, Mr. Molozane could not endure even to mention the certain.

"No, we need not trouble about business just now," he declared; "we will go and have some coffee."

And to the drawing-room they adjourned accordingly, where Beryl poured them out coffee, and Miss Molozane, at her father's request, went, reluctantly, to the piano and sang the songs he best loved to hear.

Her music, like her face, was perfection, and George, listening to her in the twilight, went back days, and months, and years, to the time when he was young; when mammas pronounced him "eligible," and girls warbled their best if he were near, and faces grew

animated at his approach; to the old, old days when he was so much at Snareham, when he was a clergyman; when he never thought to be an accountant in Fen Court, satisfied with his lot.

CHAPTER XV.

Beryl.

NOTWITHSTANDING Mr. Molozane's courtesy and his daughter's sweet music, Mr. Geith was quite determined to get to business before he slept, and he accordingly begged, nay, insisted, that his host should devote a few minutes to explaining the state of his affairs ere they separated for the night.

"We may not have time, and you may not have inclination to talk about money matters to-morrow," urged the accountant, whilst he and Mr. Molozane walked up and down the terrace together, smoking in the gathering twilight. "Tell me, therefore, as far as you can, how you are situated, and give me what papers you have to look over to-night. I shall then be able to form some idea of the work you wish me to do before I leave in the morning."

"I do not know how I am situated," answered his companion. "I only know I am overwhelmed with debt in the present, and that I am afraid to look into the future. And yet I have not lived extravagantly, Mr. Geith; you must see that yourself; look at my house, my table, my children. There is no extravagance there. I have only one man about the place, and he is ostler, coachman, messenger, gardener, everything. No person can for years have been more economical than I, and yet — and yet — —"

"It is possible," added George, quietly, "for a man to be economical in some things, and still to spend a fortune in others. The Sythlow Mines may have been an evil, but other evils must have preceded their failure."

"How do you know that?" asked Mr. Molozone.

"I know it, because the money you paid for shares could not of itself have very seriously embarrassed you, and no call has as yet been made upon you."

"And what do you infer from that?"

"I infer that you must have been unfortunate before you ever heard of the Sythlow Mines; that you must have speculated and lost heavily in other ventures."

"You are right," said Mr. Molozone. "I have been all my life trying to retrieve my position, and the consequence is, I have gone from bad to worse. It is no wonder we outsiders detest the very name of business, for we always come off worst when we attempt to play at it."

"Because you do play at it," retorted George; "business is like learning, the man who works, acquires, the man who plays, gains nothing. Business is an edge-tool which ought not to be touched save by hands that have served an apprenticeship to its use."

"There are some that no experience would teach to handle it with impunity," persisted Mr. Molozone.

"Then they ought to learn not to handle it at all," said the accountant.

"They do learn that, but too late, unfortunately," sighed his companion, and the pair walked the whole length of the terrace without another word.

At last George began: "I think it very possible that if the mines do not turn out very badly indeed,

your affairs may not prove to be in so hopeless a state as you seem to imagine. I had, not long ago, a client who thought his estates so much involved, that without help from his relations he could do nothing to extricate himself. When I came to examine into the matter, I discovered he would be able to clear his property in a few years. I always find that business people take too sanguine a view of their position; while country gentlemen look on the gloomiest side of the picture; many a merchant tells me he knows his estate will pay sixty shillings in the pound, and believes it would, although at the same time he may be absolutely insolvent; and I have known many gentlemen imagine they were on the verge of beggary, when their affairs had merely become a little entangled. I do not, therefore, think that you need anticipate the worst, unless you have kept your accounts up, square and close."

"I wish I could agree with you," answered Mr. Molozane; "I wish I could think there was even the faintest hope of competence for me and mine. But you shall judge for yourself. I will look out my papers to-night, and you can glance over them in the morning, before you go."

"With your permission, I will do so before I sleep, and give you my opinion in the morning. I must be back in London before mid-day to-morrow, and I should like to know a little of what I shall have to do before my return. I always work late, and if you give me the papers, I will examine them, if you allow me, in my room."

"As you choose," said Mr. Molozane, wearily, and they re-entered the drawing-room, where candles were lighted, and the young ladies occupied, each according

to her taste. Miss Molozane was reading, Beryl was engaged in needlework, and Louisa sat at a side-table, writing. Her cap was almost in the candle, and her hands were black with ink. She was in the agonies of versemaking, George perceived, and remained perfectly unconscious of their entrance, till her father went up, and said something to her in a low tone.

Then she blotted off her manuscript, closed her desk, and came and sat beside Beryl, who made believe to scold her for soiling her fingers, and for writing with a pen instead of a pencil. The girl did not answer, she only drew closer to her sister, and looked at the various objects in the room, as if she did not clearly see them.

"I will not have Louisa exhausting herself," exclaimed Mr. Molozane, irritably. "How many times am I to tell you, Beryl, that she shall not write?"

"She frets so, papa," answered Beryl, softly, and George saw the tears coming into her own eyes as she spoke.

"It was not Beryl's fault," said Miss Molozane, from her immeasurable distance; "I told Louisa to write if she liked, for when she is not scribbling she teases me to death. She will recite out loud, and is a perfect torment."

"She may as well be writing, as thinking, papa," added Beryl, and she took the inky fingers in hers, and stroked them caressingly.

Looking at the pair, George Geith could not but feel that there must be something very lovable in the nature of the second sister, and for a minute or two he almost admired her more than the stately beauty who could not tolerate the gushings of Louisa's muse.

But was Louisa's muse merely gushing? If so, what was the meaning of the strange, absent, expression her face wore at the moment; what was it that the poor, weary child, looking with great eyes out into the darkening night, beheld? Did she see visions, and dream dreams? Was the only land of liberty man ever enters here below — the limitless realm of imagination — free to the young creature before him?

Could she see what he might never behold? the flowers and the fields, and the hills and the valleys of that second world? Could she see men and women walking through it, not like phantoms, but like real beings of flesh and blood? Could she hear words spoken, inaudible to other ears? Did she really know the full particulars of troubles, joys, hopes, fears, in which no mortal beside herself might ever be a sharer? or was it all nonsense? Was the rhyme a knack, the verse meaningless, the genius but common talent? If so, the soul looking out of her eyes did not belong to her, but had wandered forth from the body of some true poet, and entered by mistake into the poor child's fragile frame.

But if it were genius that abode in her, where had she got it? whence had it come? what would she do with it? Would the fire blaze fitfully for a season and then die out? In future days would she burn her manuscripts and settle down into a commonplace woman, happy and contented like her neighbours? Would she dream away her life writing sonnets, making verses, scribbling poetry? Would she neither work nor rest, be useful neither as author nor housewife? or would she pass through the fire to success? Would she reach the hill-top of fame to sit there triumphant, but lonely?

Would she yet wear laurels wet with tears, yet be clad in purple which should conceal wounds and scars? Would the little creature's life be more interesting, more exciting than that of thousands of more attractive girls? or would she outgrow it all, become commonplace, and, sweeping aside the ashes of her dead genius, light home fires on the once cheerless hearth — fires which should gladden her own, as well as other hearts, and enable her to perform her woman's mission better than she could ever hope to do with pen and ink?

As he worked through the short hours of that summer's night, George Geith often caught himself speculating about the future of the three girls, marvelling concerning them. Now it was Miss Molozone, now Beryl, now Louisa, and then George forced himself back to the actual duties surrounding him, and read on, on, on, till he arose, amazed at the folly revealed to him.

Mortgages enough to have swamped any man; interest unpaid and accumulating; money put into the maddest ventures conceivable. What the Molozone property might be worth the accountant had no means of judging, but unless its value were considerable, he felt certain there would be a very faint response, to even the first call of the Sythlow Mining Company.

Having arrived at this conclusion, George put his papers aside and went to bed.

When he awoke next morning he had the greatest difficulty to remember where he was. He looked round the bright airy room, he raised himself on his elbow to listen to the cawing of the rooks, and the cooing of Beryl's pigeons. When he opened his window such a

sweet, fresh smell of the country rushed into the apartment that he had to pause in his dressing, thoroughly to enjoy the perfume-laden breeze.

Early as it was, he could hear Beryl out in the garden, talking and laughing, and he hastened away down-stairs, so as not to lose a moment of that glorious summer morning, on which the sun seemed to shine differently to what it had done any day for years past.

In the lower rooms he saw no one but a housemaid, and so he passed through the hall-door, which stood invitingly open, and remained for a minute or two looking over the lawn, and the fields, to the woods belonging to Molozane Park.

Very charming was the Dower House, with its wealth of climbing roses, and sweet-scented honeysuckles, with its old-fashioned casements, its thick hedges, and its thorough seclusion. But for the gables and the chimneys, which appeared amongst the trees in the distance, any one might have supposed the Park to have been an appanage of the Dower House, instead of the Dower House being an appanage of the Park.

"And how long will even this be his?" thought George Geith, as he leaned against one of the pillars of the porch. How long indeed?

Just then Beryl came in sight. With hands full of flowers, and face bright with health, she advanced to greet their guest, and congratulate him on his industry.

"So you really do get up early, after all? papa said you were not to be disturbed on any account, for that no Londoner liked to rise before midday."

"I am generally up sooner than this," George

answered, "but even if it were not so, I do not know who could sleep on, and let a summer's morning in the country slip out of his life unenjoyed."

"I know several who would rather sleep than do anything," observed the young lady. "When grand-mamma is here, her curtains are never undrawn till twelve o'clock; and as for my cousin, I sometimes think he will never get up at all. I cannot understand it," finished Beryl. "I cannot understand people not liking to be out and about such a morning as this."

"Nor I," echoed George; "but then, to be sure, such a morning as this, in such a place as this, is new to me."

"Do you always live in town, then?" she asked. "Always," was the reply.

"But you surely travel some part of the year; or, at any rate, go to the sea-side, or Ireland, or Wales, or Scotland, or somewhere?"

"I never go to any place except on business."

"And do you not get horribly tired of business?"

"No; and it would be of no use if I did, for I should have to go on working just the same."

"I should not like to have to work," said Beryl, naively. "It seems to me so much pleasanter to be able to do precisely what one likes. Mr. Geith," she suddenly added, "how do you think papa's affairs will turn out? Have you any idea how he is really situated?"

The question was unexpected, but George was not thrown off his guard.

"I am not in a position to form any opinion on

the subject," he said. "It will take a long time to ascertain exactly how Mr. Molozane stands."

"And if you had taken that long time, and had ascertained, you would not tell me," added Beryl, with a smile. "Is that what you mean, Mr. Geith? if so, you may be frank with me, for papa and I have no secrets."

"I am perfectly frank with you," was the reply. "I am saying now what I shall say to Mr. Molozane when I see him — that it is impossible for any one to tell how he is situated till there is some regular statement got out of his affairs."

"And how long would it take to get out that statement?"

"A considerable time, I am afraid, for the accounts have not been regularly kept."

"Notwithstanding the headaches we have given ourselves over them," sighed Beryl. "Papa and I have spent hours over those papers, till I am sure our brains have been addled. But I hope we shall be able to keep the Park. I do hope and trust papa will not have to sell that."

"You mean Molozane Park?"

"Yes, he talked of selling it and keeping this place; but even if we had to live on bread and water, I should like to try and keep the Park. It is something to feel it is one's own, although it is let. Perhaps I ought not to say so, but I do believe it is the prettiest place in Hertfordshire, and it would be a terrible thing to let it go out of the family. I can show you the house from the end of the Elm Avenue, if you would care to see it. Papa will not be down for half

an hour yet. He has not been able to rise early since his illness. Would you like to see the Park?"

What could George say but "yes;" and indeed he was only too willing to go; for the girl's perfect straightforwardness, and utter want of conventionality, was to the accountant, something almost like a new revelation.

She seemed to have nothing to keep back, nothing to hide. She claimed his sympathy and interest as a matter of right; and she seemed to think that he would go heart and soul into the question of keeping the Park as she did.

"I will leave the flowers in the house," she said, "and be back in a moment;" and back in a moment she was, ready to trip off by his side to the Elm Avenue.

As they walked, George looked at his companion more attentively than he had cared to do before, and came to the conclusion, that really Beryl, when away from her sister, was an extremely pretty girl.

And Beryl was pretty. It is a pleasure to me to lay down my pen, and think of that face which I have seen so often. As I write, it rises out of the past, and comes up for me to paint it. I can see the girl, in the beauty of her youth and innocence, standing with the sunshine streaming on her hair, which was of that rarest brown we, for want of a better name, call chestnut. How shall I without colours to my hand describe that hair? — nut-brown with a shade of red thrown over it; dark hair that yet looked golden in the sun, hair that made her skin seem white as snow, that was plaited after the fashion of those days and coiled round and round her head behind. Hair without a wave —

smooth, glossy, bright, luxuriant. Hair, for one lock of which one man in the world would have come down had he dared from Molozane Park and begged like a beggar at the gates of the Dower House.

Then, her eyes — those dear, sweet, kindly, brown eyes, that seemed to be always laughing, and loving; eyes that beamed as though they could never be troubled; eyes that made one forget every other feature in her face, and insist that on their merits alone she should be judged.

What did it matter if her mouth were a little too large, and her nose scarcely large enough? What did it signify if her face were a shade too broad, so long as she possessed those eyes, that exquisite complexion, and luxuriant hair? Without being in the least degree handsome, Beryl Molozane was pretty enough to have satisfied the requirements of most people.

Sweet seventeen, lively, happy, ingenuous, what better companion could a man desire for a summer morning's walk, with the dew still lying heavy on the grass?

George Geith was contented with her, at any rate. She was a girl, he felt, who grew on him as he saw more of her. The pleasant chatter with which she ran on, as they passed through the garden, and out into the shrubbery beyond, amused him like the prattle of a child.

Their path led them close to the farm-yard, where George saw Royal and the poodle gravely superintending the cleaning of a small black pony. Royal was stretched at full length, with his nose between his fore paws, whilst Guess sat on the top of a barrel, looking sideways at the proceeding.

"Royal, Royal!" called out his mistress; and in a moment both dogs came towards them at full flight. The poodle won by about a length; but was overturned at Beryl's feet by the retriever.

"Be quiet, sir; down, Royal!" and, indeed, she might well say "down," for the great black dog had both paws on her shoulder, and his nose in her face. Next minute, however, he had left his mistress, and was growling at her companion, whilst the poodle commenced barking, and yelping in chorus.

"Now, Mr. Geith, we shall see whether Royal will take kindly to you or not. It is quite true what Louey says, that there are some people he will never like. Royal, be quiet, this moment, and listen to me. Sit down, sir; sit down and attend," and she raised her forefinger as a signal, which the dog obeyed, sitting down on his haunches, and wagging his bushy tail from side to side, whilst he kept one eye on Beryl, and the other turned suspiciously on the stranger. "This gentleman, Royal, is a friend of mine, and you are to shake hands with him. Now, shake," she said, as George held out his hand towards the animal, "shake, like my good old dog."

For a minute Royal remained perfectly still. His tail lay motionless on the ground, and he looked George gravely in the face, with his soft wise eyes. Then, as if satisfied, he solemnly lifted his paw, and allowed George to take it.

"That is right!" exclaimed Beryl, triumphantly; "but look, Mr. Geith. He is going to give the other, too." And she was correct. As if to make assurance doubly sure, Royal, with a gravity, which would have

befitted a religious ceremonial, held out his left paw for Mr. Geith's acceptance.

Beholding this, the poodle straightway got up on his hind legs, and walked towards the stranger.

"That is his way of evincing friendship," Beryl explained, and the quartet proceeded on their way.

Up the long elm avenue Beryl and her companion walked side by side, talking about all manner of things as they walked; but still coming back to the question which evidently lay near the girl's heart. Should they or should they not be able to keep the Park.

The idea that they might not be able to retain even the Dower House had never evidently crossed her mind.

"It would be so sad, Mr. Geith, to have to part with all this. The Park begins from the bottom of this elm avenue, and that is the house belonging to the property. I am sure if the place were yours, you would be loth to see it passing away into the hands of strangers."

Silently George looked out over the Park, which lay stretched before them. They had been ascending gradually since they left the Dower House, and now, as they stood beside a rustic gate, which afforded egress from the so-called avenue, he could see all the mortgaged acres, all the woods and plantations; the noble mansion, and the silvery lake, which might be owned by Ambrose Molozone, in the dreary future, never more.

Looking at the scene, as it lay bathed in the glory of morning, George Geith felt that were such an heritage passing away from him he should go mad to behold it. Would the man whose daughter stood beside

him prove more philosophical? Would he, could he, go out and fight as he, George Geith, had done? The property must go; but when it was gone, what then? Perhaps the girls had money on which their father might live; perhaps they would marry, and he find a home with one of them.

How would it turn out? Would the man live? would he fight? would he lie down in despair? or would he plod wearily on his way to the grave, whilst all this great possession, all this wood, and field, and water lay calmly smiling in the sunshine, owned by strangers, who should tramp his name from out the soil?

"You could not sell it, could you, Mr. Geith?" she asked, and the question brought him back to everyday considerations.

"I should not like to do so," he answered; "but under some circumstances, I might think it expedient to sell, for all that."

And he would have turned to look at the place again, but that Beryl suggested they had better retrace their steps.

"Papa may be down by this time," she said, "and Louey is sure to be, and we never like Louey to wait for her breakfast. She is so delicate, we are always afraid of trying her strength in the least."

"I did not think she looked delicate last night," said George, who wanted Beryl to talk about her sister if she would.

"You cannot always judge by looks," answered his companion; "Louey is not at all strong. And then that writing!" she added; "I sometimes wish I could burn all the books and pens and ink and paper in the world,

but then I suppose she would write with a stick on the ground. We have lost one sister already," she went on in a lower tone; "one sister exactly like Louey, only, perhaps, not quite so old-fashioned (I call Louey old-fashioned for want of a better word), and that makes us over-anxious about her, people say. Grand-mamma wants papa to send her to school, but we could not part with her; and even if we could, a school would kill her in a month."

"And what does she write?" asked George. "I am, perhaps, impertinent in putting such a question; but I really cannot conceive what a child, for she is little more than a child, can find to write about."

"I am sure I cannot exactly tell you," answered Beryl; "we do not pay much attention to what she writes, for fear of encouraging her. She has written some tragedies; and if she reads anything in history that strikes her fancy, she at once makes a scene out of the driest bit of fact, and dresses it up into a long poem. She lies awake at night muttering verses; and when she was so ill last winter she would stand up in bed making poetry about all sorts of things — principally about the angels. Half her time, I think, Louey is not in this world at all, but in some other of her own. As I tell you, however, we do not notice her much; and, besides, I cannot endure poetry. It is always melancholy, and I hate melancholy things. There is enough of trouble in the world, without making more for ourselves out of books."

In the face of what he knew about the state of Mr. Molozone's affairs, it would have been vain for Mr. Geith to contradict his companion's opinion, even had he disagreed with it; but he thought, at the same

time, that the Molozaues must be a curious family, not to know whether that, which Louisa was pouring out her life in writing, were good, bad, or indifferent, whether such a passion had been given for nothing, or whether the child held concealed, under all her eccentricity, that precious pearl, genius, which is possessed by so few, and counterfeited by so many.

And yet, scanning Louisa's face attentively by the unflattering light of day, George Geith could not imagine the girl to be anything beyond the common. It was very possible her friends were right, and that she was merely old-fashioned. Certainly her sententious remarks were amazingly amusing, and the manner in which she was kind enough to express her approval of Mr. Geith's opinions, comical in the extreme; but still, when all was said, her remarks were not clever; her ideas were perfectly common-place, and every-day. Hearing her talk was like hearing a child repeat, second-hand, the trite moralities, the cut-and-dried experiences of ordinary adults.

As for Miss Molozaue, George was not favoured with even a distant view of that lady, for she did not come down to breakfast, nor put in any appearance before he left the Dower House.

But he knew he was to see them all again, for he arranged with Mr. Molozaue to come to Withefell if possible, on that day week, when his host promised he should get to work in earnest.

"It is going to be such a warm afternoon," remarked Beryl, as she stood beside an open window. "Are you not sorry, Mr. Geith, to have to go back to close, stifling, suffocating London?"

"Indeed I am," answered George gallantly; "I did

not think my office unendurable yesterday, but I know I shall to-day;" and with this little speech he bade good-bye to the young lady and her sister, and started on his homeward journey.

He had said truly that he would find his office unendurable. The change from country to town, with the thermometer in the shade standing at somewhere about ninety, could, under no circumstances be considered pleasant; and a billet which he found lying on his desk did not by any means tend to make him cooler.

There was not a word written inside it, but he pulled out from the cover, first a highly glazed envelope, ornamented with silver, which, in its turn, enclosed two cards that announced to all whom it might concern the marriage of Sir Mark and Lady Geith.

CHAPTER XVI.

Family Affairs.

WHEN George Geith took his cousin's wedding cards out of their dainty envelope, he knew that the two possible possessions had been wrested from him; that in the future he might never marry Cissy Hayles; that no matter who lived or who died, he should never own Snareham Castle.

Certainly, it was by no means sure, either that Sir Mark would leave a son or survive his cousin, and there therefore remained a chance of the latter some day falling into the title; but, if he did, it would be a barren title, for never a Geith again, George clearly foresaw, would inherit at the same time wealth and rank together.

"A dowerless bride, a spendthrift bridegroom," muttered the accountant, bitterly, and he looked out at the trees in Fen Court, standing so still in the summer noontide, and saw not them, but the woods surrounding Snareham Castle, which were never now to be owned by him, whether baronet or accountant.

For some time previously he had concluded that his cousin meant to cut off the entail, but now he knew it. He felt sure, if Mark had been dealing fairly by him, he would have bidden his kinsman to the wedding, and come and talked matters over with him first. But no; Mark had cheated him; and as he arrived at this conclusion George Geith felt that he hated his cousin, as strong natures do hate weak ones, before they despise them.

He had hastened back to town to work, but he could not work. He was, for the time being, upset to find that by the aid of that wise act which does not do away with the law of entail, but which renders an entail something worse than useless when it is effected, he was cut off from his house.

For a younger son is only a younger son so long as he retains a chance, however remote, of succeeding to the family estate. Once that chance goes, as it had gone for George Geith, he may as well be anybody else, Jones, Brown, or Robinson, as the second born of a duke.

And with Snareham gone, what was George Geith even to himself, even in his own eyes, but this — a hard-working accountant, who had succeeded beyond his own expectation, perhaps, but who was, nevertheless, not even a City magnate; who was, even in commercial circles, only a tenth or twelfth-rate man; who

had his way to make, and who, with all his exertions, had not yet got his bread buttered on one side?

Always before this he had to *himself* been something higher; and, for a man's comfort, it signifies a great deal more what he is to himself than what he appears to be to others.

I do not say that this passed through George Geith's mind as I have written it; on the contrary, every feeling, save anger against Mark, was vague and confused.

The great injustice which his cousin had inflicted on him seemed for the moment to have swallowed up all thought of how that injustice affected his own present prospects.

"It was such a mean thing," thought the accountant; "and it was such a mean way to do it. If he must have cut off the entail, why did he not come to me like a man, and say he had not the courage and patience to wait and clear his estate, and that he intended to free himself of debt more expeditiously than by saving? I could not have hindered him anyhow; but, as it is, first of all telling me he would not cut off the entail, and then doing it! I do hate a fellow who has not pluck enough to face the consequences of his own actions."

It was a natural thought, but even as it passed through his mind, George remembered that he had kept something in his own life very close, that he had never looked forward to consequences, and that when they came he had fled rather than face them. True, that something affected only himself, but, had it been otherwise, would he have been braver?

Thinking of that past, so full of misery, that past

which had brought him to the naked present, the accountant could not but acknowledge that in his hour of trial he had been found wanting, and that, if he had wrought out the plan of his own life better, his cousin's life might have been different too.

Had he been able to remain in the Church, Sir Mark would never have met Cissy Hayles, never have married her; perhaps never, with a male relative at his hand to warn him of danger, have suffered his affairs to become so hopelessly entangled. As it was, without friend or rudder, he had drifted out to sea, and from the barren rocks whereon he had elected to take his future stand, George Geith watched the vessel which contained Snareham and independence sailing straight away to ruin.

"He will be a beggar before he is ten years older," concluded the accountant, "before ten years, if he live so long;" and as he sketched out this pleasant ending for his cousin, George Geith thought of the sentence which Sir Mark had spoken in jest, one part of which seemed destined to come true at any rate: "When I am retrenching on the continent you will be a great man."

Supposing the rise as well as the fall proved a true prophecy; supposing that as Mark came down George ascended?

There was something very pleasant to the accountant in the idea of that possibility — something which smoothed his temper and awakened his charity.

"It will be worse for him than for me, if he have done it," argued George, "for I am working, and can work, and he cannot. Besides, he is doing himself out of a certainty, and depriving me only of a possibility.

Before I condemn him absolutely, also, I must be sure I am not accusing him falsely. Perhaps my aunt has yielded; but if so, why was I not asked to the wedding? That might be the Hayleses' doings — yes, that would be the Hayleses — —”

And thinking of the Hayleses, the accountant laughed aloud, whereupon Mr. Foss opened the door between the two offices, and inquired if he had called.

“No — yes,” answered his principal. “I am going out, and if anybody wants me I shall not be back for two or three hours.”

“If Timmins calls about his schedule?”

“He shall have it this evening.”

“Hunt will be here to know when his books can be balanced, what shall I tell him?”

“You may tell him to go hang himself,” retorted Mr. Geith, as he took down his hat and brushed it. “He has let his books run back three years, and then expects them to be finished in a day. He shall have his turn, that is all I can promise him.”

“And that little account of Mallard's?”

“I'll send it round.”

“And — Mr. Geith,” called the clerk, running down the stairs and out into the court, “Lavers wishes to see you particularly.”

“I will call.” And before Mr. Foss could recollect any other person who wanted anything of his employer, George was half-way up Fenchurch Street, on his way to the West. He wanted to see the only man in London who knew all the ins and outs of his affairs, who had stood as a break-water between him and his enemy in days gone by, and who had communicated to him the news of his freedom. This person, Mr. Tettin,

would ascertain for him whether or not Sir Mark had really cut off the entail, and then, if ever the accountant met his cousin again, he should know precisely on what ground they were standing.

Mr. Tettin's practice lay much amongst the clergy. He had likewise the honour of being professional adviser, solicitor, man of business, what you will, to several noblemen and baronets, in addition to which he had many untitled, but wealthy clients, who owned houses in town, and estates in the country, who had large balances at their bankers', and money in the funds.

With business, with trade, Mr. Tettin might, in a general way, be said to have nothing to do. He left the affairs of merchants and citizens alone. He had no concern with companies, but in all charitable societies, all clerical schemes of benevolence, Mr. Tettin had a finger, and the consequence was, that, by reason of long contact with Christianity, and all manner of good works, the solicitor had acquired such pleasant manners, such a grave, bland, courteous, self-possessed style of address, that it was quite delightful to hear him talk, and to know that he regarded law as a religious matter, which tended to the general well-being and social and moral improvement of every man, woman, and child in the community.

Somehow the philanthropic literature on the boxes ranged along his shelves, made one feel as if *he* were the prime mover in all good works.

Then his bookcases — they were as full of divinity as of law. They had "thoughts," and "evidences," and "proofs" in abundance. Doubters might there find their answer. Infidels were there confuted. Very

few of Mr. Tettin's clients but had contributed his mite to the literature of Great Britain; and a copy of every book they had written, found a home in Mr. Tettin's office.

There were people who said Mr. Tettin's library, at Staines, was differently furnished; but if this were so, who could assert that the lawyer had not plenty of orthodox reading in town. For he did read. Heaven only knows where he found the time; but he was up in all those sermons, and could talk about his "line of argument" to the most fearful bore who came to seek his advice.

Unexceptionable, likewise, was Mr. Tettin in his attire. He wore no loose coats, no fast trousers, no coloured ties. Fearfully and awfully black in his apparel, the lawyer looked the very incarnation of respectability. The stiffness of his collars, the whiteness of his shirts was something to talk about. Charms to his chain, indeed! Mr. Tettin would as soon have thought of putting a ring in his nose. His appearance was worth a thousand a year to him, and his manners a thousand more. They were just the same to the curate as to the peer. He had no clients who were not, by position at all events, gentlemen, and Mr. Tettin treated them as such.

As regards all else, the lawyer, like his patrons, was as other men: he ate, he drank, he married, he had children, he had a house at Staines, where the butcher and greengrocer called for orders, just as they do at yours, reader, and mine.

He smoked decorously; he had friends, he had tastes, and the chief of these was a liking for fishing.

Now, George Geith had, at an early stage of their

intimacy, discovered this weakness, if such it may be called, and been able to give him some valuable information on the subject. Therefore the lawyer liked George Geith; I do not think I should be going too far if I said he was very fond of him.

For when he was once free, the accountant told the lawyer how he had worked during his seven years of servitude; and though in his own practice, Mr. Tettin was above trade, he was not in his private capacity above admiring a man who had been able to throw aside his surplice, and make his way through life in an office coat.

The thing was altogether beyond his experience, and he thought, and thought rightly, that the person who had done this was no common individual, but one whom, in spite of his beard, and his business habits, and his connection with the City, he, Mr. Tettin, was quite safe in interesting himself concerning.

Wherefore he expressed pleasure at seeing the accountant once again, and inquired what he could do for him.

"I want you to find out," answered George, "whether my cousin has cut the entail off Snareham or not."

"You think he has done so; may I inquire your reasons?"

"He was embarrassed, and he is married; I had cards this morning!"

"Married to an heiress?"

"No, to the daughter of my old rector, a girl who had not a shilling. That is my one reason," proceeded George; "my other is, that he did not ask me to the

wedding, which I think he would have done, had all been fair, and above board."

"You really think so?"

"I know he would have asked me, unless either he did not want to see me on account of the entail, or that his wife's family desired my absence."

"Why should they do anything of the kind?"

"Mr. Hayles knew," was George's short reply, but it was enough, lawyer and client looked at each other and smiled.

"He knew the first past," suggested the former, "and had other daughters."

"And had other daughters," acquiesced George, and there was a moment's pause.

"I can very easily find out whether he has cut off the entail or not," began Mr. Tettin; "but of course you are well aware, nothing you can do or say will be of any avail, for if he have not cut off the entail, he cannot do so now, and if he have cut it off, why, he had the power to do so, and that ends the matter."

"All I care for is to learn how the case stands," answered the accountant, "so that when Mark and I meet, I may know what ground we are going on."

"I understand," and Mr. Tettin seemed by those two words to say that he had travelled over all George's mind and knew every feeling it contained. "There is one thing I forget. Did you tell me you were next heir to Snareham, or was there any one between?"

"One between, my uncle Mr. Arthur Geith, but that life has for years counted for nothing."

"It does seem hard," mused Mr. Tettin; "I hope Sir Mark has not been so unjust; but if he have, I need not remind you, Mr. Geith, that those events

which seem most grievous at the time, frequently prove to have happened for our ultimate good."

"I am aware of that, Mr. Tettin," said the accountant, with commendable gravity; "but still, if the choice were offered me, I would rather retain my chance of Snareham, and let my ultimate good go to the share of somebody else. It is not that I grudge Mark, Snareham," he went on, hastily, "or that I would not wish him health, wealth, and wisdom wherewith to enjoy his possessions; but I do not like to think that were he to go, I should succeed only to a barren title; and over and above all, I cannot endure to see a fine estate thrown to the dogs. I do not like it, even where I have no interest in the property."

And George thought as he spoke, of the lands he had looked over that morning, before it had come fully home to him that Snareham was passing from the Geiths, as the Park from the Molozanés.

He was standing in the golden mist of the morning, surveying the scene once more; whilst the lawyer, all unconscious of what was passing through his mind, replied cheerfully, "Well, Mr. Geith, we must hope the best; at all events, I can soon ascertain the best or the worst," and with that they parted.

Mr. Tettin proved as good as his word. It was not long before he ascertained that George's fears had proved true prophets. Snareham was free from the entail, but Snareham was not free from debt. "It will not be long before he has to sell," thought George, and he put Snareham out of his mind, and turned to his daily drudgery again.

But he was not to be allowed to forget Snareham. Before another fortnight had passed, letters came from

both bride and bridegroom, informing him they expected to be in London in the course of a few days, and expressing an earnest desire to see him in Halkin Street.

"Our marriage was a hurried one," wrote Sir Mark, "and *strictly private*. The curate stood as my best man, and Cissy had only one bridesmaid, Sophia. The very precarious state of Mrs. Hayles' health prevented the fuss usual on such occasions, for which I was not sorry. The only thing I regretted was, not being able to ask you, old fellow, to come and see me 'turned off.' I have been uncertain as to future movements, or I should have written to you before. We shall be in Halkin Street on Saturday at latest, when we hope to see you for dinner."

Whilst Cissy was even more conciliatory. She entreated George to believe that, could her wishes have been followed, he would have been asked to dear Morelands, to add to the happiness of the happiest day of her life. ("I'm sure I don't doubt her," interpolated the accountant, "she would have had all the county there if they would have come.") Mark talked of taking her abroad, but she hoped they would remain in London, till her darling mother's health was completely restored; and if so, she trusted (three dashes under this), George would come and see them often, and talk over old times ("Catch me doing it!" ejaculated George), and consider their house his home. She hoped to hear from him, if he had a moment to spare; and expecting to see him very soon, she remained his affectionate cousin, Cecilia Geith.

"I'd a great deal rather you were my cousin than my wife, madam," thought George, folding the billet

up, and smiling that smile of his which was not pleasant to see. There had been a time when he would have kept that note in a drawer by itself, but now he cast it amongst his business letters and sat down to answer Mark's.

Very boldly he plunged into the difficulty, asking his cousin straightforwardly why he had not done what he had to do, openly? why, if he must give Snareham over into the hands of strangers, he could not at least have told the person who had the nearest interest in the matter and talked affairs over with him? "Because," went on George, "I had at least the right of a possible heir to know what you were about to do."

"To sons and brothers the Geiths have never grudged that Snareham should pass; but you are the first Geith who ever even thought of cutting off the entail, and you ought not to have done it, since it was through your extravagance, and yours only, the property became involved. Taking all circumstances into consideration, I think it better for me not to see you when you come to London; but I wish you none the less to believe you and your wife have my best wishes for your happiness."

"Best wishes and worst fears," thought George, as he sealed the letter, to which, by return, came the following answer: —

"For God's sake don't tell my mother; I could not help it, George; I declare to you I could not help it. When I left your office last time, I left it resolved to retrench; resolved to ask Cissy to wait; and I did ask her, and she consented, but Mrs. Hayles, who was then dangerously ill (she is very ill still) sent for me, and said she should like our engagement broken off. She

declared she could not die in peace without seeing Cissy either married or free. She said Cissy was wasting the best years of her life waiting for a man who might never after all be able to make her his wife; and, on the whole, she should like the affair broken off. What was I to do, George? I leave it to you, what was I to do? I could not marry unless I broke the entail. I could not give her up, so I chose the former. But, on my honour, George, I meant no wrong to you; I knew if I had no son you would inherit, and that if I were once free from those cursed life insurances, I should be able to clear the estate in a few years, and marry and keep a wife to boot. Don't be angry, old fellow; I will do justice to you, and by you; I swear I will. Do not make Cissy and myself wretched by refusing to come and see us; she encloses a line in this."

Which ran to the effect, that if Cissy had known her husband was going to break the entail she would never have married him. "I would not have let him do a wrong to any one living for my sake," wrote the lady, "and I am so sorry, so sorry."

"That will not secure Snareham to me, however," muttered the accountant, "and at any rate I have no security but that she played as deep a game as her mother. Clever old lady that! But then, to be sure, she had to deal with a fool."

Whose letter he answered thus:

"DEAR MARK, — Although what you have done is past help, and therefore ought, according to the proverb, to be past grief, I cannot help repeating that I think you ought to have taken me into your con-

fidence; you *might* have married spite of the entail, but I suspect you wanted to do that first, which you were aware you could not do afterwards. It was not knowing what to do about the entail kept you single so long, that, and nothing else. If you deceived yourself as to your perplexities, you did not deceive me. You are mistaken in thinking I should inherit, failing a son, because you might have daughters, but all this is beside the real question, which is, that you have given power to your creditors, and yourself to dispose of Snareham *absolutely*. You have thrown down the only barrier which was strong enough to keep strangers off the estate; and so surely as I am writing this, Mark, so certainly will the day come when you will repent of your own act, and wish you could undo it.

"I am not angry, and I have no wish to make either you or your wife 'wretched,' but you will do very well without me, and I would rather not go to Halkin Street."

To this epistle there came no reply, and George was beginning to think he should hear nothing more on the subject, when one day Sir Mark and his wife made their appearance in Fen Court.

Prettier than ever young Lady Geith looked, as she told George they had come to entreat him to be friends with them, and to let bygones be bygones.

"You will forgive and forget," said the graceful flirt; and she was so pleading, so lovely, so pertinacious, that George was glad to promise anything she asked.

"I will go and see you," he said; "though I still think it would be better for me not to do so. Business

and pleasure ought never to attempt to mate. There has been a divorce pronounced between them from the beginning."

"All work and no play ——" began Cecilia.

"All play and no work makes a man a beggar," retorted George; "and I should take less kindly to begging even than to work."

"And these are your territories?" went on the lady, and she explored the office as though it were some strange country, and she looked at his pigeon-holes, and copying books, and inks, and diaries, and nests, and files, as she might at the fruit hanging on the boughs of foreign trees. She walked from one window to another, and then back again; she asked questions about his neighbours, about the churchyard, about the blank, black walls, about his clerks, about his business.

"Show me what you do," she said; "show me this new thing, which is better than preaching, which is going, Mark says, to make your fortune."

George opened his books, and showed her the means by which he made money; showed her the endless columns, the interminable entries, the weary writing, the lines and lines of figures, until at last the bride cried out:

"Oh! why did you leave the Church? why in the world could you not have remained a clergyman?"

"I liked this better than that," he answered quietly.

"I would not be this," she said. "I could not bear to pore over these books, and travel up and down those columns, for all the wealth in Lombard

Street; and Mark told me, as we drove along, that there were millions, and millions of money there."

"And all those millions," answered the accountant, "are kept together by drudgery. Some make and some spend in this world; but it is well nigh impossible to make and spend together. I am making now. If I have good fortune I shall spend hereafter."

"And I am spending now. What shall I be doing hereafter, George?" asked his cousin, laughingly.

"Repenting," was the reply; and George closed his ledger, as though he had just made a couple of entries in it.

CHAPTER XVII.

At the Dower House.

ON the whole, George Geith was very glad when the day arrived for him to revisit Withefell. He said to himself that it was a confounded bore to have to leave all his town business, to go poking into the entangled affairs of a country gentleman who could not trust his papers into the hands of a stranger; but still George was glad, for if he had not wanted to go, he could have declined the work.

As it was, he accepted the work, and went down to the Dower House to finish it.

Finishing, however, did not in this case prove nearly so easy as beginning; and before George Geith had been three hours engaged at Mr. Molozone's papers, he found he should either be a loser by the transaction, or have to charge his employer an exorbitant price.

It was one of those pieces of business which he

was in the habit of taking in town and doing at his leisure; when no person's books wanted balancing, no man's schedule haunted his sleep.

No money could pay him for going down to Withefell, and setting Mr. Molozane's house in order. Was it possible for him to devise any plan by which he might do at once justice to the Squire and himself? Could he leave town every night and sleep at Wattisbridge for a month? Could he re-establish his health and get through Mr. Molozane's business at one and the same time?

If the gentleman would wait his convenience, George thought the thing might be managed; and accordingly he broached the subject whilst he and the Squire were wading together through the accounts.

"As you like," answered Mr. Molozane. "I am in no hurry to know the worst. Providing the thing be done, I am not particular as to when, only you must stay here; you must consider this your inn for the time being."

"But," expostulated George, "when I am making this arrangement solely to suit my own convenience ——"

"I presume I may make an arrangement to suit my own pleasure likewise," finished Mr. Molozane. "We will just settle the matter at once, Mr. Geith. Come when you like, go when you like, finish when you like."

And thus George Geith was made free of the Dower House, and soon became quite one of the family.

Looking back, he could not believe his host to be one and the same, with the man who had walked into

his office nine months before with such a haughty mien, with such unconciliating manners. He could not identify Mr. Molozane at home with Mr. Molozane abroad. He could not understand how the fences had come to be broken down between them; how Mr. Molozane could regard absolutely in the light of a friend one whom he had once treated somewhat as a servant.

The accountant could not know that Mr. Molozane felt this silent, untiring, clear-headed, hard-working man ought to be able to keep the evil to come away from his threshold, or, if that were impossible, would tell him how best the evil might be met.

He was so thankful to have an adviser, a helper, a man who, mentally, was a self-reliant giant, that he ran to extremes in the matter; and thought in George's presence there was safety; in his absence, danger.

Besides, he liked his new acquaintance better than any friend or neighbour he possessed.

He could talk to George without the necessity for constant concealment; he could be silent without exciting remark; he could be worse than silent — dull, and still the accountant knew the why and the wherefore, and was not surprised.

Further, though Mr. Geith was in business, he yet possessed the manners and feelings of a gentleman. How he had come by those manners and feelings, Mr. Molozane did not know, and George did not enlighten him; but they were pleasant to the Squire for all that; and he took this new acquaintance into favour, without stopping to consider why he did so, or how the intimacy might end.

He liked George and made him welcome; and

George liked his quarters, and made himself at home. For a time, of course, the accountant went through the ceremony of deceiving himself, of mentally saying it was a bore to have to leave town, a nuisance having to relinquish paying work for unremunerative; but after a very little he grew honest, and acknowledged that his life just then was a pleasanter existence than it had been for years.

It was more cheerful, certainly, for no place could be dull in which Beryl Molozane abode; and as he got more and more at home, so Beryl unveiled before him, and showed this old man of the world what he had never seen before — a perfectly natural light-hearted girl. Who was as bright as the sunshine, as gay as a kitten; who thought no more what anyone thought about her, than if she had been only three years old; who took Mr. Geith into her confidence, and made the Dower House a home to the homeless man.

By degrees, too, Miss Molozane's ice thawed, and she began to treat George with such favour, as showed she had ceased to think of him as an accountant, and had come to understand he was a man.

Whilst for Louey, she made no secret of her liking, but said openly, and in the face of the family congregation, she thought Mr. Geith nicer than anybody she knew, Mr. Werne not excepted. And, up to this point, I may remark, Mr. Werne, of Molozane Park, had been the god of the young lady's idolatry.

To work in that house was not easy; to work the whole day through, a thing not to be dreamed of; and with dismay George saw that the progress he was making was of the slowest.

Very conscientiously he pointed this out to Mr.

Molozane, and entreated permission to take the papers with him to town; but this the Squire would not allow.

Perhaps he saw from George's manner that he was by no means loth to stay; that he found the country air beneficial; that the mental atmosphere he was breathing seemed pleasanter and purer than all. Anyhow, he entreated him not to trouble himself; to come when he could, to stay away when it was more convenient, and to be satisfied Mr. Molozane was very glad for him to remain, and should be very sorry when he had to go.

Thus it came to pass that the accountant grew more and more intimate with every member of the family; that he shared their merriment, knew their anxieties, and began to understand what home really was.

"Should he ever feel happy away from one again?" the lonely man asked himself, whilst leaning out of his window, looking at the Park as it lay bathed in the silvery moonlight. "Am I wise?" he thought; "am I safe?" and he sat down and pictured Matilda Molozane and her beauty till he concluded he was not safe, that he ought to depart at all hazards.

Then he ran on to other matters; all, however, connected with her. Why was she better dressed, better mounted, better cared for, than anyone else about the house? How did it happen that, in spite of the close economy practised in the house, an economy which the Molozanes were either too proud or too frank to endeavour to conceal from him, the beauty seemed to know no lack of anything? For Beryl and Louey, muslins and prints, bonnets apparently home trimmed;

mantles he himself had seen Beryl making! For Miss Molozone, the richest of dresses, the most fashionable of bonnets, the most delicate of gloves.

Except good wine and heavy plate, there was nothing, in or about the house, such as might have been expected in the home of a man who still held a good position in the county, and was known for miles round as "the Squire." The furniture, though handsome, was old; the curtains were faded; the carpets threadbare. There were but two female servants and one man about the establishment; and as for the table, the fare satisfied George, who was not particular; but many a London shopkeeper would have turned up his nose in contempt, at the plainness of the fare with which the Molozones were perfectly content.

It was not that the viands were ill-cooked, or badly served: it was merely that at every turn economy was practised, and that luxuries of all kinds, the speculative but conscientious gentleman eschewed.

And there were signs and tokens also which proved that this economy was not a matter of recent growth; that Beryl had told him the literal truth when she said one day:

"I have never known what it is to have money all my life, Mr. Geith. We have been short of it ever since I can remember anything."

She said it laughingly, making light of her little domestic anxieties; but George remembered the sentence, and puzzled himself about the apparent incongruity there existed, between Miss Molozone's belongings and her father's means.

Almost as if she had guessed what was passing in his mind, Beryl came to him next morning, when he

was standing on the lawn, watching the groom exercising her sister's horse, and said, with a slight flush on her cheek —

"I have often thought, Mr. Geith, that horse must puzzle you; but perhaps you know it is not ours: it is Mrs. Elsenham's. Mrs. Elsenham is that delightful old grandmother about whom you have heard me talk."

"Would it be impertinent for me to inquire why Mrs. Elsenham does not provide a horse for you likewise?"

"Certainly not. I shall be delighted to tell you about Granny, because I hate her. It is a comfort to meet with any person to whom I can say fearlessly, 'I detest my grandmother!' And I give you fair warning, Mr. Geith, that if you say it is wrong of me to do so, I shall hate you too."

"Then assuredly, whatever I may think, I shall keep a discreet silence," he answered.

"But you must not think; at least, you must not think differently from what I do. Granny is the most detestable old woman that ever lived! The first time Tilly is out of the way, I will show you Granny exact. She and I have been at daggers drawn since I can remember anything."

"And is that the reason she does not let you have a horse?" asked George, anxious to draw her back to the point whence they had started.

"Not at all: the reason of that is — but I think I must begin at the beginning, and tell you a little piece of our family history. I do not see why you should not know what all the parish knows, a great deal better than its alphabet."

"I have no claim to be told anything, however, Miss Beryl," remarked George, virtuously.

"I never said you had; but I should like to tell you; and then, no matter what you see about the house, you will not be astonished. Papa would tell you only that it is a sore subject; for he hates Granny more than I do. She took him in; she cheated him, in plain words, Mr. Geith. But for Granny, we should have been still up at the Park, and I should never have been talking to you here."

If she expected her companion to regret this, she was mistaken. Perhaps she did not: at all events, she proceeded:

"I should tell you, Mr. Geith, that I scarcely remember my mother at all. Indeed, I question if I should recollect her, but that my memory has always been refreshed by that portrait which hangs between the dining-room windows. She must have been very like Matilda, I think. Papa says she was handsomer, but I scarcely can imagine that. You think Tilly very handsome, don't you, Mr. Geith?"

Was this chit of seventeen trying him? Did she want to ascertain whether he cared too much for her sister or not? Had she guessed he stood in danger? Was she warning him off the track?

All this passed through George Geith's mind as he answered, with an amused smile, that he did consider Miss Molozane very beautiful — more beautiful even, in his opinion, than the portrait in the dining-room.

"Thank you, Mr. Geith," said Beryl, simply; and she thought for a moment before she went on. "After all, it is not so easy to tell a story," was her next sentence, and she laughed and coloured at her own

awkwardness. "In some respects it is not a pleasant story, and that makes it more difficult for me to know what part to put first. Before papa came into the Park, it was mortgaged; but everybody thought his wife's fortune would more than set him straight. You must have heard of Mr. Elsenham, who made such a gigantic fortune out of Bandana handkerchiefs. He was my grandfather; and as he had but two children, a son and daughter, people said papa would be better off than any Molozane had been for centuries.

"During his lifetime Mr. Elsenham would make no settlement on my mother. He allowed her six hundred a year and he used to give her splendid presents (we have some of her jewellery now); and it was an understood thing that when he died she was to have a third of his property. When he did die, however, it turned out that his wife (that's Granny, you understand) had got him to leave every halfpenny under her control. She was a lady who liked power, and everything was, for the future, in her power. I do not say the disappointment killed my mother, but it certainly hastened her death. She died when Louey was born, and then Granny stopped the allowance altogether, and has kept it to herself ever since."

"Do you mean, Mr. Molozane never had any part of his wife's fortune — that Mrs. Elsenham has made no arrangement about you?"

"Oh! she has arranged! — I was going to tell you about that," replied Beryl. "My uncle Harry died before his father, leaving one son. This son, Richard, has been brought up by his grandmother, who is going to do great things for him; and she proposed, years

and years ago, that Dick should marry Matilda, and the money be thus kept in the family."

"And Mr. Molozone?" asked George.

"Papa did what was right, as you might be quite sure he would," answered Beryl, whose cheeks were by this time crimson. "He would not have Matilda bound by any such engagement, till she was old enough to decide for herself. And Matilda has decided, and they will be married whenever Richard comes of age."

For a minute there was silence. With all his self-command George could not make an indifferent remark on the subject; and had he been more at ease himself, Beryl's visible embarrassment would have rendered it difficult for him to know what to say.

They had wandered, during their conversation, from the lawn to a walk which wound away by the side of the Park, and Beryl was now leaning on the oak paling that separated her old home from her present one, with her face buried in her hands.

Was she crying? and, if she were, what was the cause of her grief? Had she cared for this cousin? Had there been any quarrel between her sister and herself? Was it the old, old story, of young people thrown together, of hearts exchanged without permission, of an engagement being forbidden, of a union proving impossible? Was this young thing, gay as she seemed, really in trouble? Had she been called on to give up, without a murmur, all the hopes of her life? And was she, now in the very spring and promise of her existence, weeping over withered flowers?

Thinking this, there came a dangerous longing into George Geith's heart to comfort her, to tell her

what he knew about life; to assure her that so long as men and women will battle against grief for themselves, so long, likewise, God in his mercy permits the sun to rise for them after the darkest nights of misery and despair humanity knows.

Many a word which he could not have spoken in the days when he was a clergyman, when consolation was his office, comfort his business, he would willingly have poured out then. Many a sentence which he had learned out of the great lesson book that the Almighty opens for us all, clerical or lay, occurred to him then; but he was wise, and held his peace. There was nothing in what Beryl had told to warrant observation from him; and although he felt, or fancied he felt, at the moment, the same longing to comfort the girl as a father might to comfort his vexed child, he luckily remembered he was not her father, and Beryl not a child.

"You know now," she went on after that pause, uncovering her face, but still not looking at him, but letting her eyes, wet with tears, wander out over the Park, "you know now why Matilda has everything different from us. It is not her fault, for Granny insists that the future Mrs. Elsenham shall have all that befits her station. I should have thought," added Beryl, with a fire in her eyes which seemed to dry the moisture out of them in an instant, "that a Molozone needed as much as an Elsenham, any day; but I suppose gentry can afford to do without things that *parvenus* cannot. My sister must have that horse and groom; my sister must be dressed like Solomon in all his glory; whilst Louey and I are simple as the lilies of the field. Would I do it?" and Beryl clenched her

little hand. "Would I do the bidding of any old woman? Would I be a slave for the sake of any amount of money that could be offered to me?"

She was so vehement that, for the life of him, George could not help laughing, even whilst he answered:

"Perhaps you would not be a slave for the sake of money, but you might, for the sake of some one you cared for very much?"

"I do not think I should; but, at any rate, it would not be for the sake of Dick Elsenham. You will see him to-night, and a very nice kind of person you will see, if you are not at all particular."

"Why, what kind of person may he be?" asked George.

"He is this," said Beryl, pulling off her bonnet, and running her fingers through her hair: "and he is this," and she stroked an imaginary moustache: "and he is this," and she caressed her soft cheek: "and he is this," and she drawled out her words with an affected lisp: "and he is this," and George absolutely started at the sudden insolence and assurance of her manner: "and he is this," and she drew back like a sullen coward: "he is a fop; he is a fool; he is a bully; he is — to be my brother-in-law," and Beryl lifted up her head like a young war-horse scenting the battle afar off.

"Is there no help for it?" George inquired.

"Yes, if you can give us back the Park free from mortgages; if you can give us horses, carriages, servants; beyond all things, money," she scoffed. "Mr. Geith, you must not think Matilda mad, when you see Richard. She has been with my grandmother most

part of her life — off and on, I mean — and she cannot endure what we can. Short means are a wretchedness to her. She has always been accustomed to have everything she wants. She likes gaiety. It would be a living death to her to have to stay here always. Besides, she does not dislike Richard as I do. She likes him. If she did not — if it were only for the money she was marrying — I know a man that, were I in her place, I would choose before Dick, twenty times over. I had rather hear his grammar than Dick's drawl. I should prefer his stories to Dick's oaths. You will hear Mr. Richard Elsenham swearing, morning, noon, and night; but you must never mind him, Mr. Geith; no matter what he says or does."

George bit his lip; he was coming now to an understanding of what the young lady desired — of what she was entreating at his hands.

"Would it not be better for me to go?" he asked; "and return when Mr. Elsenham leaves?"

"I do not know when you would return, then," she answered; "for he lives here nine months out of the twelve. Either here or at Wattisbridge, I mean," she added, "which is much the same thing."

"I wonder if Mr. Molozone would allow me to take the necessary papers to town?" he said.

"Do not ask him; pray do not," she entreated. "If you knew what a comfort it is to papa to have anybody to talk to whilst Dick is here, you would never think of going. Besides, if you begin with my cousin as you mean to go on, you will have no trouble; only you must not mind him, even though he should be tiresome sometimes."

He made no answer till they had paced the whole

length of the walk, and were almost at the house again. Then he said:

"Is it to be peace at any price, Miss Beryl?"

"If you can manage it, Mr. Geith, I shall be very grateful."

"Then I will try," he said; and the girl left him and ran in.

Just then, out came Miss Molozane in her riding-habit; with her coquetish hat and drooping feather; with her light riding-whip and her flowing veil. She was looking for George to help her to mount. It was a duty he had taken kindly to; and, to say the truth, Miss Molozane did not object to the attention in the least.

There were so many folds in the habit to be properly arranged; there was so much nicety required about the curb; the reins were so often twisted; and the girths needed such close inspection, that this business of mounting had come to be quite a serious affair; a something which occupied a long time, and gave opportunity for a considerable amount of innocent flirtation.

On the occasion in question, as George knotted up the curb rein to the particular length desired by the fair equestrian; as he patted the arched neck of the beautiful animal she rode, a thought passed through his mind as to whether he should declare boldly to her who he was, and try to go in and win this prize.

But, pooh! what chance had he? What was his birth in comparison to Elsenham's money? what his possibilities beside Elsenham's certainties? and, even if he had a chance, were these grapes worth climbing after?

They were very nice to look at; but George did not know much about how they would taste as a form of refreshment for life. He had his doubts; he was not a young man in feelings, ideas, or even age, you remember, my reader; and though he seemed to have taken a fresh lease of youth at the Dower House, he had still his experience of former tendencies to fall back on, in case of need. He rather thought Miss Molozane might not be worth the trouble; and already the fancy he had felt was passing away from him as quickly almost as the lady was disappearing down the avenue.

"She rides well, don't she, sir?" said a voice close beside him; and turning, he beheld Mr. Molozane's factotum, groom, gardener, coachman, standing at his elbow. Standing with a cloth in his hand, with which cloth he was in the habit of giving a finishing polish to any bit, buckle, or stirrup, that might seem to stand in need of such attention.

"I taught her, I did; when master lived at the Park, I taught her. It was me first held her on a pony. Yes, she do ride well; and that's a nice thing she's on. Mr. Elsenham, he rides well too. They make a handsome pair, they do; but I know, if I was a gentleman, which I would choose. I'd never take Miss Molozane whilst Miss Beryl was single: and I've known them both since they was as high as my knee, I have."

"Does Miss Beryl never ride at all?" asked George, as much perhaps in order to turn the conversation as from any desire for information.

"Not often; her pony can't hold foot with the chestnut. When Mr. Elsenham is here, he sometimes

gets her to try one of his horses, but Miss Beryl is afraid now. He has served her such tricks, she is afraid of being thrown. He says he wants to make her sure of her seat; but I know better. It is just his jokes," muttered the old man, as he shuffled away; adding something under his breath, which was not, George suspected, a blessing on Mr. Richard Elsenham.

"I'd like to catch the fellow playing any tricks with her," thought the accountant, as he sat down in the library, and commenced sorting over the papers: "I'd duck him in the nearest horsepond."

From which expression it will be seen that the promise of peace at any price Beryl had exacted from her new friend, was not altogether unnecessary or uncalled for.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Quite at Home.

WHEN a young lady has, from the age of fifteen, been in the habit of managing her father's house, directing his servants, and making arrangements for the reception of his guests, her manners naturally become formed much earlier than would have been the case under ordinary circumstances. More particularly if the said young lady have from her earliest infancy been deprived of maternal guidance; and freed from that constant contemplation of what is proper and improper, which it seems the especial province of mothers to force upon the consideration of their daughters.

It may be rank heresy, but I hold to the belief nevertheless, that if girls be nice at all, they are nicer

when they are allowed to grow up with their feet out of the stocks, and their figures free from backboards.

It is pleasant to see a young girl starting in life without picking her steps too much; and young ladies who know all the pitfalls and quagmires of this wicked world, are apt to lose in simplicity what they gain in propriety.

Mothers wise in their generation, who are acquainted with the evil, and the sin, and the sorrow, are so anxious to keep their girls from the appearance of evil, that they will not suffer them to be natural. They forget, God help us, what one would think they ought to remember with thankfulness, that there is a time, when it is as natural to the young to be frank and open as it seems to be afterwards to the old, to be masked and veiled. They will not let well alone. They will have every word, look, action, ruled by line and plummet. They leave nothing to impulse, because, as I have said before, they forget there is a time when impulses are not all sinful, when it is natural to the young to laugh and be glad as it is to the lark to sing.

Which brings me back to what I meant to say at first, viz., that George Geith thought Beryl Molozane would not have been half so pleasant a girl had she been brought up under the eye of the stately beauty whose portrait hung in the dining-room.

He knew no mother would have suffered Beryl to wander through life at her own sweet will in the manner Mr. Molozane permitted. But still Mr. Geith had very sincere doubts as to whether a more properly trained young lady might not have plunged headlong into errors which Beryl avoided. She was no flirt —

she never appeared embarrassed. George had seen a good deal of the world, and he had certainly never been in a house where there seemed more union amongst the members of the family, and from which the mystery and wickedness of ordinary life was better excluded. Between Beryl and her father, indeed, there existed such perfect sympathy, such a thorough understanding, that George felt sure the girl would do nothing, say nothing, think nothing, which she would hesitate to confess to her parent on the spot. Indeed, in this way Beryl was a little provoking; because once or twice when she had talked to him, as George in his vanity thought, confidentially, he was astonished afterwards to find her repeating almost the same sentences in her father's presence, without the slightest idea that she was disappointing one of her auditors.

A girl who took this new acquaintance into her confidence, just as if she had known him all her life; who talked before him about her slightest house-keeping troubles; who mimicked their acquaintances, hitting off each person's oddities with a dangerous power of mockery; whom he would meet in unexpected places laughing till the tears ran down her cheeks; who was like a kitten, everywhere at once; who was not a young lady, nor even a girl, but just a child in everything save the power of keeping the house in order, and of making things comfortable for those about her; a merry drudge; a laughing Grisel, whom the servants loved as very few servants love any mistress now-a-days: how could a man help liking this young thing, thinking of her, speculating about her future?

Whom would she marry? Would she settle down

into respectable matronhood, and become quite another creature in the space of a very few years?

Would she marry a rich man, or a poor? Would she ever become fashionable, ever learn concealment, ever become different to what she then was? Somehow, George found her future impossible even to picture. He could not fancy Time's hand laid on her — always young, always laughing, he could imagine her going singing away through life; but he could not imagine her changing — becoming cold, worldly, calculating.

Thinking of the girl, now laughing inwardly at the recollection of some queer speech, some expression of anger; now remembering all her unselfishness, all her devotion, George found he was making very little progress with his accounts, and that if he was ever to get them finished he must stay more in the library, and not permit himself to be so frequently beguiled into leaving that retreat for the pleasanter sitting-room of the family.

So to work he went in earnest; toiling through the long hours of that summer day, labouring with the windows open, and every external sight, and sound, and perfume, tempting him out into the open air. He would not leave off even for luncheon — the pleasant meal which had always hitherto made such a delightful break in the hours, when he had spent a whole day at the Dower House.

To be sure, he did not gain much by the move, for Beryl herself brought him what he asked for — biscuits and water; called him unsociable, an anchorite, a hermit, and then went and gathered him fruit, which she laid on the table, nestling amongst the leaves of the mulberry and the vine.

Fruit is not a thing which even anchorites find it easy to resist. Fruit cannot be eaten like biscuits, with pen in hand and eye on paper, for both which reasons George was obliged to cease from labour and talk whilst he refreshed himself. Then Mr. Molozane came in, and settled down ostensibly to read the paper, but really, as it seemed, to hinder George getting on with his business. Nevertheless, he did make considerable progress, and would have worked right on till it was time to dress for dinner, but that at about five o'clock Beryl appeared at one of the front windows opening on to the terrace, entreating him to cease writing before he grew into a machine.

"How you can go on, on, hour after hour, I cannot imagine," said this steady young woman. "How you can live out of the sunshine, away from the flowers, puzzles me. Why, even Louey leaves her manuscripts; she is here now. Do come out; I wish you would."

"We shan't be able to enjoy ourselves much longer," observed Louisa, who had a wide-brimmed straw hat tied over her cap. "When once Dick comes we shall soon have his grandmother, and then there will be a pleasant houseful."

"I always enjoy myself when Granny is here," said Beryl. "I don't know when I have greater fun."

"Because you are always mimicking her. Mr. Geith, Beryl walks into the room behind grandmamma, on tiptoe, mocking her all the time; she has been nearly caught, over and over again; indeed she was once, for Granny saw her in the glass."

"I wonder if I dare," said Beryl, looking round. "Louey, is Matilda out of the way? Now, Mr. Geith,

here is Granny;" and Beryl, gathering up her dress in both hands, straightening her back till it was as flat as a table, drawing up her neck, and stiffening her limbs, sailed up and down the terrace with all the pomp and majesty of an ancient lady, till George, fairly overcome by the ludicrous contrast between Beryl and the woman she was making believe to be, had to sit down on one of the terrace seats, where he laughed as he had not laughed before for years.

"May I inquire, sir, what is amusing you so much?" said Beryl, stopping short in her walk, and asking the question in her grandmother's very voice.

Then, "Oh, my gracious goodness! here is Tilly. Well, Matilda, and how are you?" And she went sailing up to her sister, and bestowed upon her a most impressive salute.

"Beryl, how can you?" exclaimed the beauty. "What will Mr. Geith think? How can you be so absurd?"

"I am only moulding myself after a most desirable model," answered Beryl, still in her cracked, old woman's voice; "and Mr. Geith or any other mister may think what he pleases. When I am in the path of duty, the remarks of the herd fail to affect me in the least. I suppose Maria Elsenham may walk up and down her own terraced walks without drawing down the impertinent comments of strangers."

And Beryl was off again, sweeping, rustling as she went.

"I ought not to laugh, Miss Molozone, I know," said George, apologetically.

"For once, Mr. Geith, you have arrived at a just

conclusion," remarked Beryl, severely, as she moved past.

"It is not possible to help laughing at Beryl," said Miss Molozane; "that is the worst of it; and our laughing encourages her to do and say things she would never otherwise dream of. You know, Mr. Geith, she ought not to mimic her grandmother, and —"

"Once for all, young woman," interrupted Beryl, tapping her on the shoulder with a gesture George knew must have been copied from life; "once for all, young woman, understand that *I* did not choose *my* grandmother, and that I maintain I have a right to mimic her if I choose. *You* may have chosen *your* grandmother, and, if so, I do not think much of your taste; let that settle the question, there." And Beryl opened and shut her eyes once or twice imperatively, and balanced herself on her heels, much as a parrot balances itself on its perch.

"You will get us all into some frightful scrape," observed Miss Molozane, dolefully.

In a moment Beryl dropped her grandmother, and was her own proper self again.

"How shall I get you into a scrape?" she asked. "Can Granny kill us? Can she send us to the Tower? Is she our queen? are we her subjects? Does she pay our debts? Does she do anything but make herself as disagreeable as she knows how when she comes down here? Get into a scrape! I wish I could keep her out of the house by getting into a scrape, that I do! — yes, that I do!" And Miss Beryl's cheeks flamed, while she stamped her little foot on the ground, to add emphasis to her words.

"But would it not be wise to cease talking about her when she is not here?" asked her sister.

"Do you want me to go into a thousand pieces when she is here?" asked Beryl. "Do you want me to explode with pent-up wrath and indignation? Should you like to see me in bits — a leg here and an arm there? If so, you will tell me to hold my peace about Granny. If I could not say I hated her, I should die; but as it is, the thought of the fun I can make of her enables me to behave with civility when she is in the house. You do not know how civil I am to Granny, Mr. Geith; and she can't bear my civility or me either."

"And she can't endure me," put in Louey.

"But you wrote a poem about her," said Beryl. "She did, indeed; and, as it happened, the poem got into Matilda's desk, which she lent one day to Granny. Matilda is excessively ready to lend things to Granny, I may remark; and the delightful old lady looking for note-paper, she says — but, as I believe, rummaging for secrets — came on this poem, and read it, and had us all in and interrogated us, and sent for papa; and we had such a to-do. The poem began —

"At Kensington there dwells a dame,
Maria Elsenham is her name,
And — —"

"Beryl, I desire you to stop," broke in Miss Molozane. "Mr. Geith, you might tell her how wrong it is. Perhaps she will listen to what you say, though she will not attend to me."

"Miss Beryl, I really do think," began George, but she interrupted him with —

"You need not go on. I know all you are going to say much better than you do yourself. You were wanting to tell me about grey hairs and young heads. You were about to say that Granny must be a lady of the highest respectability and wealth; and that my conduct amounts to sacrilege. You were going to tell me the fate of those children who mocked Elisha; and to inform me that people who ridicule others are often ridiculed themselves: but it is of no use. No matter what is right or what is wrong, I must laugh at Granny; and for anything else I don't care."

"Do you know what happened to 'don't care?'" asked Miss Molozone.

"There have been so many 'don't cares,'" retorted Beryl. "There was one ran away to sea and was drowned; one fell among savages; one was eaten by a lion on the coast of Africa (I would tell you what part of the coast, only I don't know that myself); and another happened to have a sister called Matilda. Her fate was the hardest of all, I think — but I hear horse's hoofs; I hear Sultan trotting up the drive; and I know Dick is coming, and I am not dressed to receive him. There, Miss Matty, that is your fault — there." And Beryl pulled a grimace.

"Do you know whether papa is in the house?" asked Miss Molozone, who coloured perceptibly at Beryl's intelligence.

"I don't know, and I don't care," murmured that young lady. "Dick will be sure to find us out. I am not going to meet him, Tilly, if that is what you are looking so pitiful about. If you think it necessary for any one to ask him to make himself at home, you can go and do so yourself."

"We had better go in," suggested Miss Molozane.

"Not at all; I am very comfortable where I am. Ah! here he comes;" and at that instant George heard the library door flung open; then an audible "Where the devil are they all!" which sentence was immediately followed by the speaker, who stepped out on to the terrace and greeted his cousins with —

"Well, girls, how are you?"

"We feel a great deal better now you are come," answered Beryl, demurely; and she held out her hand to the young man, who evidently considered that his relationship justified a warmer salutation, which he might have exacted, but that at the moment he caught sight of Mr. Geith.

There was a supercilious lifting of his eyebrows, a contemptuous measuring of the stranger's social standing, an unqualified stare of amazement; and then a look towards Beryl which said as plainly as a look could, "Who the deuce is this fellow, and what is he doing here?"

"Mr. Elsenham, Mr. Geith," Beryl answered; and thereupon the two gentlemen bowed.

"You must have found it very warm riding this afternoon," remarked the accountant.

"Infernally," was the reply; and Mr. Elsenham took off his hat as he spoke.

"You are covered with dust," said Louisa, with the air of a person who considered she had made an original observation.

"These cursed roads are always dusty," Mr. Elsenham graciously answered.

"Most roads are so when they are not muddy," opined Louisa, at which speech the young man laughed.

"Have you written any proverbs since I saw you last, Solomon?" he asked. "No! Nor finished ten tragedies; nor made a better Paradise than Milton's? You lazy little wretch! I'll see that you work whilst I am here. And when are you going to get rid of that cap. I give you fair notice I shall set it on fire;" and he was making a step towards the girl, when Beryl interrupted him.

"I won't have it, Richard," she said. "You shall not torment Louey. Let her cap alone, and her too."

"It is such an outrageous thing," he observed.

"Nobody asks you to wear it," she retorted; and then the idea of Dick in a cap so overcame her, that Miss Molozane felt constrained to interfere and rebuke her sister severely.

"Know this part of the country well?" asked Mr. Elsenham, turning towards Mr. Geith.

"No, it is quite strange to me; and I am not likely to know it much better, for I am only here on business."

"Humph," grunted Mr. Elsenham, and he took a comprehensive glance round the party; after which he said, "that business must be a d——d bore, though, thank the Lord, he knew nothing about it save by report."

"It is lucky for you that your grandfather had a closer acquaintance with it," remarked Miss Beryl.

"It is well there are some people in the world who will work like galley slaves," answered Mr. Elsenham. "I'll be hanged if I would."

"Would you rather starve, Dick?" asked Louisa; whereupon the young man told her to "shut up;" and inquired if Mr. Geith would have "a weed."

The politeness being declined, Mr. Elsenham lit a cigar for himself, and asked where his uncle was.

"He is gone to the Park, I think," answered Miss Molozane; upon receiving which information, her cousin at once turned to Beryl with —

"And how is Mr. Werne?"

"So far as I know, he is quite well," she replied.

"And how far do you know?" he asked, taking the cigar out of his mouth, and putting the question in a tone, which George by no means approved.

"The last time papa was at the Park, he made no mention of Mr. Werne being ill. As you seem particularly interested about him, however, perhaps I had better send Robert up to inquire."

"I'm not interested in the fellow, hang him! I don't care a d——d sixpence whether he is ill or well. Have you seen this Withefell saint, Mr. Geith? And what do you think of him?"

"I have not seen him," answered the accountant, "nor heard of him, save from Miss Louisa."

"You should get Beryl at the bellows then. Who is wise, holy, good? Mr. Werne. Who is well-informed, well-bred, well-travelled? Mr. Werne. Who never swears, never is out of temper, never d——s his servants? Mr. Werne. And, if I may add so much on my own account, who is the most cursed hypocrite, the most confounded upstart, the most intolerable prig? Mr. Werne!"

"It would be a blessing for us if you were only like him, instead of being what you are — a slanderer of a good man, before whom you dare not say the things you say before us!" panted Beryl.

"Ah! Mr. Geith, that is all very fine, but don't let

it impose upon you. Beryl abuses me in company, but you cannot imagine all the nice compliments she pays when we are alone;" and Mr. Elsenham puffed a cloud of smoke out of his mouth, and watched it curling up into the silent air.

If ever Mr. Geith felt a desire to kick a man, it was at that moment. He would have liked to thrash the fellow, and thrust him neck-and-crop off the premises. He longed to pick a quarrel with him, to get an opportunity of telling this new comer what he thought of him, his manners, and his speeches; but he luckily remembered his promise to Beryl, and biting back his words, kept peace.

"You are fortunate," he said; "with many relatives the process is inverted."

"Do not attend to what Dick says, Mr. Geith," interposed Louisa; "he and Beryl quarrel more when there is nobody by, than they ever do before people."

"That's all you know about it, Solomon," remarked Mr. Elsenham: "Beryl and I have been friends and cronies ever since she wore a short white frock and a sky-blue sash. We robbed birds' nests together, pelted the ducks, laid trains of gunpowder under the cats, chased the fowls, and frightened old women. We quarrelled then. I have a vivid memory of long scratches on my face, for scratching and pulling my hair was Beryl's way of showing fight. We quarrel still; but we were good friends then, and we are good friends now, are we not, coz?"

"Capital at a distance," answered Beryl, who was by this time almost at a white heat.

"And near at hand, too, *ma mignonne*," retorted Mr.

Elsenham. "What a heavenly day this is, to be sure. Have you had Zillah out, Matilda?"

"Yes, I had a long ride," answered the beauty; "but I must try for the future to be either earlier or later. The evenings would be the pleasantest time, I think."

"I can assure you they would for me," observed Mr. Elsenham. "Never could see the fun of getting up early in the morning: never could see the beauty of sunrise and dew-drops; and all the rest of the rubbish:" and Mr. Elsenham knocked the ash off his cigar, and waited to hear if any one would contradict him.

No person did, however; George had made up his mind not to argue with Miss Molozone's *fiancé* if he could help it. He saw he was an individual who the more he was contradicted sought all the more occasion for argument; and the accountant was determined to keep his promise and his temper, if he could.

Which forbearance brought its own reward, for Mr. Elsenham took an opportunity of remarking to Miss Molozone that for a tradesman Geith seemed a devilishly decent sort of fellow; appears a confounded deal too much at home with you all, though. Wonder at my uncle allowing it. Has he been making love to Beryl?

"Making love to Beryl!" and Miss Molozone opened her fine eyes in astonishment.

"D—— it, you did not think I should imagine he had been making love to you," retorted her betrothed. "I don't see any symptom of softness, remember; but still I thought I'd ask the question."

"How could such an idea enter your head?" asked Miss Molozone. "The man is well enough for his sta-

tion; but he is only an accountant; he is only here on business."

"He seems to find his business remarkably pleasant," said her cousin, and who could say but that his idea was correct?

"One cannot have a person in the house and not speak a civil sentence to him," observed Miss Molozane.

"Did I say you could; but that is different. Here I find you all gathered together on the terrace, talking, laughing, making yourselves as agreeable as may be, to a man about whom my uncle knows nothing, except that he can add up a column and cast accounts."

"He had been hard at work all day," Matilda explained. "I think Beryl coaxed him out. She never likes to see any one working too much."

"Beryl again!" muttered Mr. Elsenham; "Beryl will get herself into a mess some of these days, if she does not take care."

"I shall begin to think you are in love with Beryl," said Miss Molozane, with an angry flush. "You seem to think no soul should come to the house but yourself. Last time it was Mr. Werne; now Mr. Geith. Pray, let Beryl manage her own affairs; she is quite competent to keep herself safe without your help. You ought to have more consideration for her than even to mention her name in the same breath with Mr. Geith; who may be a respectable married man for anything we know to the contrary."

"Stuff!" exclaimed Mr. Elsenham. "The fellow is not married. He knows a precious deal too well how

to make himself comfortable amongst single women to have any tie at home."

"That may be your opinion," said Miss Molozone; "but Beryl has always declared he was either married or a widower."

"Who was either married or widower?" asked Beryl, entering the drawing-room with Louisa at the moment.

"Mr. Geith. Richard says he is sure he is nothing of the kind."

"Shall we ask him, Dick?" inquired Beryl. "Louisa could easily inquire how his wife supported his long absence. Could not you, Louey?"

"Which of you, should I say, wanted to know?" demanded that young lady.

"You could say we were all dying to become acquainted with Mrs. Geith," suggested Mr. Elsenham; "and that it would add greatly to the pleasure we are deriving from her husband's society, if she could be induced to come to Withefell with him."

"You might add also, Louey," said Beryl, "that Dick is wearied of our society, and wants something fresh."

"He stops at the 'Stag,' I suppose?" went on Mr. Elsenham. "You could tell him there is capital accommodation there for families, church close at hand, doctor over the way."

"He does not stop at the 'Stag' at all!" exclaimed Louisa. "He stops here."

"In this house?" demanded Mr. Elsenham. "Do you mean he eats, drinks, sleeps here?"

"To be sure he does," answered Louisa. "Where else would you have had him eat, drink, and sleep?"

"Well, I'll be hanged if ever I heard anything like this!" cried Mr. Elsenham. "My uncle must be stark staring mad. He had better send round the crier and gather in all the tramps in the country. I must speak to him about it."

"If you want to do so," said Beryl, "you'll find him in the library with Mr. Geith."

"Oh! I am not going to say anything before the man. What, in the name of Heaven, Beryl, do you think I am made of, to imagine I'd insult him in that way?"

"I had not the slightest idea what Mr. Richard Elsenham's exquisite tact might suggest as the proper course," retorted Beryl, with a curtsy. "But, see! there is papa in the garden; you had better go to him and get it over at once."

Taking the hint, Mr. Elsenham walked out to his uncle, and began:

"About Mr. Geith —"

"Well, Richard?"

"The girls tell me he is staying here at present."

"What then?"

"Do you think it well, considering his station in life?"

"Sir!" and Mr. Molozone faced round on his nephew.

"I only meant to say," went on Mr. Elsenham.

"Say nothing," interrupted his uncle; "that is, say nothing, if you intended for a moment to dictate whom I should, or should not ask into this house. If I like to invite a groom to dinner, it is no business of yours. It is optional with you whether you choose to meet him or not."

"But, considering my engagement to Matilda?" suggested Mr. Elsenham.

"That engagement was none of my seeking," answered his uncle; "and if it had been, it would still give you not right to meddle in my concerns."

"But surely, sir, I may give an opinion concerning the acquaintances of my future wife?"

"You shall not express any opinion to me concerning the acquaintances I introduce to my daughter," thundered Mr. Molozone; "so long as she lives under my roof she shall be civil to my guests; and so long as you come here I shall look for a similar courtesy to them from you."

"I have certainly no intention of being rude to Mr. Geith," answered the young man, meekly; "And when I spoke I was not thinking so much about Matilda, as about Beryl."

"Which of my daughters is it, Mr. Elsenham, that you are going to do me the honour of marrying?" asked Mr. Molozone. "If it be Matilda, may I request that you will cease troubling yourself in any way about Beryl's prospects? From the curates at Wattisbridge up, you have always fancied every man you have met here wanted to marry Beryl; and once for all, Richard, I tell you I have had enough of this. Do not compel me to express my wishes on this subject again."

"But may I not ask you, sir, whether you know anything about Mr. Geith? About his —"

"That is the way to Wattisbridge," said Mr. Molozone, cutting across his nephew's speech; "and there is the way into my house. If you are going to meddle in my affairs, I must request you to take the former;

but if you decide on remaining here, you can only remain on the terms I have mentioned. Mr. Geith is staying in my house as my guest, because it suits us both that he should do so; and unless you intend to treat him as your equal in all respects, it will be well for you to return to London."

"You shall have no reason to complain of any want of civility on my part," said Mr. Elsenham, sullenly. "I like the fellow well enough; I only thought it right to tell you my opinion."

"Having told it to me, you had better let the subject drop," answered Mr. Molozone; and the two went in to dinner.

CHAPTER XIX.

Happiness.

TAKING it as a whole, Mr. Geith did not find that the new comer interfered, in the slightest degree, with his comfort or convenience. Nay, rather, as the days went by, it seemed as though Mr. Elsenham's presence made the former social freedom greater, and tended to establish the accountant more firmly in his host's favour.

Owing to some curious perversity, Mr. Elsenham took kindly to the man he had wanted to get out of the house. For a couple of evenings he had been cool, not to say sulky; but after that, satisfied perhaps that George neither meant nor was doing any harm, he was graciously pleased to unbend towards him, and evince such courtesy as he could.

If such a thing were possible, there was more life about the Dower House after his arrival than before;

what with Beryl and Mr. Elsenham quarrelling, Beryl and Mr. Elsenham disputing, Beryl and Mr. Elsenham laughing, the place was never quiet. From first thing in the morning till all separated for the night, the house was never still. When he left for St. Margaret's, when he returned from town, George heard the same pleasant clatter of tongues; without which he found his London office silent and lonely.

Light-hearted youth! Shall we not bare our heads, and thank God for your cheerful tones, your sunny smiles, your happy carelessness? Shall those who have passed through the heat and burden of weary days, not thank the Almighty for suffering the cool breath of morning to fan their cheeks once more? Shall the old not be grateful for having the burden of years pushed aside for a moment by young and eager hands? Shall they not gaze gladly over the once familiar prospects, even though their eyes be wet with tears; and if, in the young, God be pleased to give them back their own far-away youth for a season, shall they not bask in the sunshine, and listen to the pleasant joy-bells, murmuring the while a trembling thanksgiving?

My readers, pardon me if I linger over this summer-time too lovingly; over those hours which were full of such a delicious sweetness, that George Geith might have been pardoned had he wished to die then, and escape in the midst of his joy from the chance of the dark, and evil days to come.

There are some landscapes from which it is hard to turn our eyes: some lands from which we are loath to turn our feet: some places where we have been so unutterably happy, that they seem to float in the sunbeams for ever after. Like the hills lying under the

blue summer sky, like the sea spreading in sunlit glory, like fields and trees bathed in the living beauty of morning, was that time to the man whose youth was past.

Had he ever known youth? he asked himself, as he drank in the wine of that, to him, strange vintage. Had he ever been young, ever been gay, ever been happy, like those people by whom he was surrounded?

Light-hearted youth! the stern, grave man yielded to the charm of your spell; you laid your wand upon him, and behold! the years vanished, and you gave him back the days gone by.

Light-hearted-youth! How shall I chant your praises: by what means can I echo the sound of your glad voices: how may I tell of the smiles, discourse of the laughter; shout to deaf ears the magic influence you possess; persuade those who frown at your gaiety how good a thing it is for us to be near the young, and to join in their mirth?

Shall we put old heads on young shoulders? God forbid! Shall we tell of the night to day, or speak of winter to the spring? Rather, oh friends! shall we not think in the darkness, of the light, in the snow of the sunshine, and retrace our own steps, sooner than drag the young from the happy fields, where they wander among flowers, to the dusty roads and the barren highways along which manhood plods its way.

This was a glad time to George Geith, one in which he lived so fully in the present, that future and past seemed alike indifferent. Such hours as those, bathed in sunshine, steeped in honey, men who have passed their first youth know how to value, because they know, also, how seldom they may return. Holi-

days may come, summer after summer, to the school-boy; but holidays to be enjoyed are rare in after life. For this reason manhood gathers all flowers of happiness that come in its way with such eagerness of pleasure as can only coexist with pain. It has no spare buds to fling away, no such profusion of garlands that it can afford to leave one to wither. The simplest wild flower is to it as the costliest exotic; and there are no neglected roses, no drooping lilies, no withering leaves strewn carelessly along the path which has been trodden by the feet of middle age.

I do not know how it is that there are some middle-aged people who do not care for morning, or spring, or youth, or happy voices, or ringing laughter; who regard gaiety as an insult, merriment as a weakness, happiness as a frivolity; who care for nothing in their daily life but food and raiment, and dreary dinner-parties, and what they are pleased to call sensible conversation; who think there is no wisdom in smiles superior to their own sedateness; who believe that the Lord Almighty, who made the flowers to bloom and the trees to blossom, and the birds to sing, did not intend likewise the young to be gay and happy of necessity, and the old to be gay and happy likewise, if they found it possible to float with light hearts over the waves of the ocean of life.

George Geith, at any rate, was not one of those who would neither rejoice nor let others do so.

He had suffered, he had worked, he had led a lonely, loveless life; but yet, when these children with whom he was thrown piped unto him, he was ready to dance to their strains.

Happy holidays! Would I had space to linger

over those sunlit hours! Spite of the frowns of readers, of the rebukes of critics, I could bask in that summer glory for ever, and chronicle the events of each passing hour with the loving garrulity of age.

Happy holidays! — in which, though it might be the school-children were not all good, all innocent, they were yet all happy and noisy as crickets; when one would have imagined there was no such thing on earth as care, no such shadow as ruin hanging over the Dower House; when it was idleness, jesting, laughing, walking, riding, all the day long; when even George's reluctant labour seemed industry itself, when compared with the labours of those about him.

Never since he began business had a summer brought so little work with it to him.

Everybody seemed to be out of town — abroad, at the sea-side, in the Highlands, at Killarney, or the English lakes. Scarcely any books needed balancing; there were no schedules to prepare; but few columns to add up, and accordingly it came to pass that after a time the accountant did not go often into town, but remained much at Withefell, arranging Mr. Molozane's affairs.

How he managed to get those affairs into order, it would be difficult to tell; for it was against the wishes of the whole family that he did any work at all.

"What a pity it seems for you, Mr. Geith, not to be enjoying this lovely weather," Mr. Molozane would say.

"Ah! do come out;" Beryl would plead, laying her hand on his papers, and taking possession of his ink.

"We are going away for a long walk," Mr. Elsen-

ham would observe; "you had better come, too, before your feet grow to the carpet;" whilst Louisa was more peremptory still, and would as coolly take up her position in the library, and announce her intention of giving Mr. Geith "no rest" till he left off work, as if it were in the right and natural course of things for a business man to be tormented to death by a miss in her earliest teens.

"I shall certainly have to lock you out, Miss Loo," George would threaten.

"I should come in through the window," retorted Louisa, from her favourite perch, which was one of the steps of the book-ladder.

"I must then fasten the window," remarked George.

"And draw down the blinds, and close the shutters, and get in candles," suggested Louisa. "Short of that you will not keep me away. I will have you out: you shall not sit here the whole day long, write writing, add adding, till you drop down dead."

"But you write?" said the accountant.

"I write for pleasure; my writing is very different from yours," answered Louisa, with dignity.

"So it may be; but still I am able to make my business my pleasure too."

"Then it is not good for you to have so much pleasure," said the young lady; "and you shall come out into the garden. I cannot imagine what flowers, and fields, and trees, were given people for, if they never look at them."

"Some people look at them, if others do not," George answered; "just as some people see the Pyramids, whilst others never so much as hear of them."

"That is no reason why you should mope in the house all day: do come out: if you don't come fast they will all be gone; for Beryl is going to ride to-day."

"What is she going to ride?" asked George.

"Her own pony. What else should she ride? Perhaps you would like to see her mounted on the top of Dick's Giraffe."

"Indeed I should like to see no such thing," answered the accountant, as he dipped his pen in the ink, and prepared to commence work again.

"Are you not coming after all?" demanded Louisa, descending from her perch, and looking at him as though he had done her some injury.

"I shall come to see them start, if you allow me," he answered; "but I must finish what I am about now."

"You are a monster, and I cannot bear you," said Louisa.

"I have Scripture on my side, at any rate; and I must try to support your displeasure."

"Scripture — what Scripture?" demanded the young lady.

"I shall not tell you," answered George; "but if you can find out for yourself, I will say whether your guess be right."

"But — do — do — do!" pleaded Louisa.

"Surely you would not have me tell untruths? and I said you must guess first," he replied. "And now, Miss Loo, do run away; I cannot get on with a thing whilst you are here."

"But I may come back when I guess."

"If you do not come back too often," he answered; and Louisa left him.

During the next hour she was in about every ten minutes, proving wrong each time; until at last, after a longer absence than usual, he heard through the open window an argument on the terrace outside.

"You shall not."

"I shall."

"I won't be friends with you, Loo."

"Then don't be friends."

"But it is so naughty and unkind of you."

"Naughty, indeed! Who put it into my head? I had forgotten till just now; and I am so glad you reminded me of it."

"I declare, Loo, I shall tell papa."

"Do, and I shall tell papa too; but I shall first ask Mr. Geith. Beryl says, Mr. Geith," she continued, putting her head in at the window, "that your text is, 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.'"

"Never mind her, Mr. Geith," put in Beryl; "she is talking nonsense."

"Never mind Beryl, Mr. Geith," said Louisa, "she is telling fibs."

"I shall box your ears, miss," threatened her sister.

"And, Mr. Geith, do come here for a minute," entreated Louisa.

"Now, Louey, you might for once do what I ask you," interposed Beryl.

"Dick and Beryl want to know," went on this *enfant terrible*, "how Mrs. ——"

"I'll tell you what we said, Mr. Geith," broke in Beryl: "Dick thought you were not married, and I

thought you were; and then I remarked that if he liked, Louey might ask which of us was right. But I never meant her to tell you; and she knew I did not;" and Beryl looked as if she were going to cry about the matter.

"They were arguing again this afternoon," explained Miss Louisa; who, being somewhat curious on the subject herself, was determined to have her say out.

"Dick said 'he'd be ——,'" and Louisa nodded her head significantly, "'if you were married at all,' and Beryl said she was sure you were, that she had never been mistaken yet: did not you, Beryl?"

But Beryl was gone. Failing to stop her sister's tongue, the next best thing seemed to be to get out of the way of hearing it.

"Dick laid five to one," ran on Miss Louisa, "and Beryl bet a pair of gloves and her riding-whip, to show she was in earnest. So, which wins, Mr. Geith? I am to have a sovereign out of the five if Dick be wrong."

But Mr. Geith would not say which was right. "You would be too wise if you knew everything, Miss Louisa," he observed.

"But I should like so much to know," she urged.

"And I should like so much not to tell you," he answered, "that I must hold my peace; besides, it would be such a pity for your sister to lose her whip."

"Then you are not married?"

"Or for Mr. Elsenham to have to pay five pounds," went on George, coolly.

"They could not both lose, you know," said Louisa.

"Yes, they might," answered the accountant.

"How might they?"

"If I were divorced," he answered.

"Oh, my goodness gracious!" exclaimed the young lady; "I believe you are."

And she rushed straight off to Mr. Elsenham, with "You've lost, Dick — he's divorced!"

"He's your grandmother!" retorted Mr. Elsenham.

"He is not; I wish he were, instead of the one I have got! But you've lost. Give me my sovereign."

"Who said I had lost?"

"He said you would both lose if he were divorced."

"Ifs might fly, if they had wings," remarked Mr. Elsenham. "Now, Loo, be off, and tell those sisters of yours to make haste. The horses will be round in five minutes."

"But, about my sovereign, Dick?"

"Earn it, young lady," was Mr. Elsenham's advice; and he forthwith lit a cigar and walked away, smoking, as usual, down the avenue.

By the time the ladies were ready, George came round to the lawn to see them start.

"Trot is not much of a steed, is he?" asked Beryl, patting her pony's neck, a civility which Trot returned by taking her habit in his mouth and making believe to chew it. "I am always miles behind everybody."

"Because you ride so slowly," said her cousin.

"Because you ride so fast," said Beryl.

"What a deal of good a gallop would do you, Geith!" remarked Mr. Elsenham. "What a pity you do not ride!"

George could not help smiling at the observation; and it was such a strange smile in which he indulged, as he stooped and pretended to be adjusting Trot's bridle, that Miss Molozone said:

"Perhaps Mr. Geith does ride. I believe none of us have ever asked him."

"Faith! perhaps he does, though it's not much of a City accomplishment. Do you ride?" And Mr. Elsenham turned, with his foot in the stirrup, to ask the question.

"Yes, I have ridden," answered the accountant.

"Any brute like that?" inquired Mr. Elsenham, pointing to the Giraffe, which it was about to be the groom's privilege to mount.

"No, not much like that; for an uglier animal I never saw."

"He is a rare fellow to go, for all that. Should you be afraid to venture your neck on him?"

"Not in the least."

"If you are sure of that, come with us. Take care how you get up. He's a devil to kick."

"Let him kick," was Mr. Geith's philosophic answer.

"Have you ridden in the circus, old fellow?" asked Mr. Elsenham, when he saw the accountant fairly settled in his saddle.

"I have ridden across country, which I suppose is something the same thing," retorted Mr. Geith.

"After the hounds?"

"Do people generally go across the country before them?" inquired George.

"Hang it, no. I meant, have you been in the habit of hunting?"

"I was, years ago."

"Where? In the neighbourhood of London?"

"No; in Bedfordshire."

"Is that your county?"

"It is not the county where I was born; but it is the county where most of the Geiths have lived."

"You don't mean that you are one of the Geiths of Snareham?"

"Would there be anything wonderful if I did?"

"Are you any relation to Sir Mark Geith?"

"Only his cousin."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Mr. Richard Elsenham.

"How does it happen that you are an accountant?"

"If I were inclined to be polite, I might ask how it happens you are a gentleman at large," asked Mr. Geith, with a slight sneer.

"You deserved that, Dick," said Beryl. "What affair is it of yours what Mr. Geith chooses to be?"

"It is, perhaps, not my choice, but my necessity, Miss Beryl," observed George, reining in his horse beside her; to which the young lady replied in a low tone, something about her cousin being always inquisitive and impertinent.

"I shall come to you, Beryl, when I want a thoroughly good character," said Mr. Elsenham, who caught some part of her sentence. "If I have offended Mr. Geith, I am sorry for it. Would you wish me to say anything more than that?"

"There was no reason why you should have said

so much," answered George, laughing. "I am not ashamed of being connected with the Geiths of Snareham; and I am still less ashamed of being an accountant in the City."

Whereupon Mr. Elsenham was so good as to assure their new companion that he meant for the future to forget all about the City, and his business too.

"But I cannot agree to that, Mr. Elsenham," answered the accountant. "The City has given me a home; my business has provided bread and cheese; and I am not going to follow the example of the citizens, and despise that which has kept me off the parish. Business is a capital invention, and the City is a place where any man with courage and industry may push his way. The City is the proper land for younger sons to emigrate to, if younger sons could but be induced to think so."

"Bravo, Mr. Geith," said Beryl, clapping her hands; which demonstration caused the Giraffe to plunge frantically: and induced Mr. Elsenham to remark they had better get on a little faster, and breathe the horses before they became troublesome.

CHAPTER XX.

Beryl's Admirer.

It was not long before Beryl's pony fell far behind the rest; so far, indeed, that whenever Mr. Geith could pull in his horse, he turned and rode back some distance to meet her.

"Never mind me," said Beryl; "go on with the others, and I will overtake you when you commence walking."

"As if it were probable I should leave you," answered George; and the pair rode on in silence for a minute or two.

Then, "I like," began Beryl, "to hear a man stand up for his business, as much as I like to hear people stand up for their country. I think if I had to earn my bread, I should feel the dignity of labour so strongly that I should quarrel with any one who disputed it. We have some neighbours who talk about the City as if it were a den of thieves; and who, although every sixpence they have was made in trade, 'could not think of putting their sons to business.' They were happy to have had fathers who were not ashamed of trade. But for that, they would now be poor enough."

"They merely express, however, the general prejudice of society," remarked George.

"Do you not think they create that prejudice for themselves?" she asked. "The outer world can know nothing of business, except what it hears from the initiated; and if the initiated declare it is all roguery and vulgarity from chapter to chapter, what is society to say? Remember, Mr. Geith, I believe in business, and I only wish I were a man, to show what business could do for Molozone Park. I have thought a great deal about business lately, and I see that if trade were not always providing money for the aristocracy, the aristocracy would soon go down to the lowest depths of poverty. Look at the Park, Mr. Geith: if we were there now, we could do nothing for want of money; but as it is, Mr. Werne keeps up a fine establishment; gives plenty of employment; is good to the poor; is hospitable to his neighbours. I am sure," went on the

poor little girl, with a tremor in her voice, "it was a good day for Withefell when the Molozanes left the Park, for we were not rich enough to do anything for any one — not even for ourselves."

"Mr. Werne, then, is very rich?" asked George.

"Nobody knows how rich," answered Beryl, with a sad look in her brown eyes as she spoke. "He is a chemist, and has made — oh! such a fortune! His father was a chemist also, but he never got on like his son. He could buy the Park to-morrow, papa says, and never miss the purchase-money."

"And he is as good as he is rich?" suggested George.

"I could not tell you, Mr. Geith, how good a man he is," said Beryl, earnestly. "Dick laughs at me for praising him, but I cannot help saying what I think — that he is better than any one I ever knew. I do not know how it happens that you have never met him, for he comes often to see papa. That is the principal entrance to the Park," she added; "you have not seen it before, and I declare there is Mr. Werne himself!"

Beryl was right: there was Mr. Werne. Mounted on a strong, iron-grey horse, he was coming slowly down the long avenue bordered with elms; but at sight of Beryl and her companion he quickened his pace.

"We will wait for him," said Beryl, with the utmost composure; and what could her companion do but follow suit? — nothing loth, to say truth, for he was curious to see Mr. Werne, and he had now a capital opportunity of doing so.

A light-haired, fair-complexioned, grey-eyed, middle-

aged man, to whom Beryl was, George Geith saw at a glance, sun, moon, stars, and planets; whilst, as for Beryl herself, the accountant might as soon have tried to understand the sphinx as the face of the young lady by his side.

Did she care for this millionaire, or not? Would she marry for an establishment? Did she understand what all that devotion of manner, all that repressed eagerness meant? George began to ask himself these and fifty other similar questions almost before the first greetings were over — before he himself had been introduced to Beryl's friend.

Was the little lady, when all was said and done, hankering, like other people, after loaves and fishes? after the flesh-pots of Egypt? after the gold, and the station, and the influence which confer advantages not to be despised? That she cared for Mr. Werne, George did not credit; but he was commencing almost to believe that Beryl was not blind to her own interests; and he thought, for a moment, that perhaps she was exalting this man into a god, so as afterwards to excuse her own worship of him. Poor Beryl! the day came when this old, uncharitable man of the world knew her better; but that day was not the one on which he rode along the Hertfordshire lanes, listening to all Mr. Werne had to say to her.

Very much in the way Mr. Geith felt, and he wished in his heart that one of the trio was absent — either himself or Mr. Werne; but as it was, so it was; and he heard the decorous talk about the poor and their wants, their sickness, their improvidence, their necessities, which had been so familiar to him once, in

the days when he was professing to serve another God than Mammon.

In the one time, as at the other, George found the talk detestable. There are three topics which, to a man of his nature, must always, I suspect, prove wearisome, viz., servants, children, and the poor. He never could understand the interest people took in any of them; and for the moment he felt inclined to hold with Mr. Elsenham, that the Withefell saint was an awful humbug, and a tremendous bore.

Beryl's propriety likewise was something dreadful to contemplate. Not once, but fifty times, George had heard her making fun of the very men and women in whose behalf she was now so eloquent.

She had been good enough to imitate old Mrs. Mears' whine, Job Darth's stammer, Mrs. O'Rourke's brogue, and Mary Hurst's snuffle. She had gone over every soul in the village, *seriatim*, mocking their peculiarities, hitting off their characteristics, baring their falseness, and yet still here she was, riding along with as demure a face as though she had never ridiculed any living being.

"And about Beames' rent, Mr. Werne? I believe he is now in constant work?"

"I can't stand this any longer," thought George, and thought it with the addition of an oath; and while Mr. Werne was answering, he struck his horse stealthily yet sharply, causing him to dance and curvet across the road.

"You have not a very quiet animal, sir," observed Mr. Werne; in answer to which Mr. Geith muttered some almost inaudible reply, whilst he struck the horse again, reining him in tightly as he did so.

Straight up went the brute on his hind legs, and forthwith Beryl became alarmed, and cried out:

"You will be killed! pray don't strike him; you don't know what horrid tempers all Dick's horses have."

"I know this is rather an awkward animal to manage at a walk," answered George, not without a certain satisfaction; whilst Mr. Werne said, courteously, he thought in the stables at the Park he might surely find something to suit him better, and that he hoped he would come and take his choice.

Just then Mr. Elsenham and Miss Molozone appeared in sight. "They had come back," they said, "to see if Beryl and Mr. Geith were safe;" and they shook hands with Mr. Werne, and remarked on the heat of the weather, and the beauty of the day, with most praiseworthy politeness.

By-and-by Mr. Elsenham and George dropped behind, Mr. Werne escorting the ladies in front.

"So you have been favoured with a sight at last," remarked the younger man, when they were out of earshot. "What do you think of Beryl's saint?"

"That he is like all other saints," was the reply.

"In what respect?"

"Too meek — too good — too much like an old woman," said George, as he touched his horse with his whip again.

"Now I tell you what, my good fellow," cried Mr. Elsenham, "if you try that, you'll come to grief to a certainty; Giraffe won't stand it."

"Giraffe must stand it," was the reply.

"But he rears."

"I know he does; he was rearing a few minutes since."

"And why can't you let him alone?"

"Because I am sick of being quiet; because I am tired to death of this pace; because I hate talk about the poor."

"Hear, hear!" said Mr. Elsenham, approvingly.

"Why, in Heaven's name," went on the accountant, "can't they get their wine and their jelly, and their physic and their clothing, and their alms, without such an everlasting clatter about their wants? I'm sure I should think it trouble enough to see to their necessities, without having to talk them over afterwards."

"D—— the poor!" said Mr. Elsenham with great gusto. "But, after all, the poor are sometimes only made a pretext, as in the present case. Over tracts, flannel petticoats, and beef tea, Beryl and Mr. Werne carry on their courtship. If ever she marries that Pope, she and I are quits, for there will be no fun, and no life in her afterwards."

"Miss Beryl might do worse, nevertheless," remarked George, sententiously.

"That's the deuce of the matter. If the man were poor, one might find something to say; but as it is, so it is."

"Gold wins the day all the world over," remarked the accountant; and he thought of the man beside him whom Matilda was going to marry, and of the man riding in front with whom Beryl was coquetting.

For what else could he call it? If she liked him, why did she not encourage him? If she did not like him, why did she praise him up to the skies, and listen to him so demurely?

He was trying to solve what we have all tried vainly to solve sometime or another, the enigma of a neighbour's heart. He was judging of its works from the way he saw the hands moving. He thought he knew all the wheels within wheels that were spinning round in the girl's mind, and accordingly, because he would not acknowledge that man knows nothing of man, he judged — as we all judge when we condemn others besides ourselves — wrongly.

In the midst of our sin, in the midst of our folly, in the midst of our weakness, there is one consolation of which the preacher never tells us, namely, that it is not with man, but with God, the last sentence rests. How would it fare with us if our neighbour had to dispose of our souls? if he had to tell our motives, recount our deeds? I think about this when I hear man's verdict — man's righteous verdict according to man's light — on the thief and the murderer. I think that another volume which is to us a sealed book has been read up on high, and that the other side, over which, it may be, angels' tears have fallen, has been pleaded before that only tribunal where all man's misery, his temptations, his antecedents, his weaknesses, his terror, his blindness, his feeble strivings after light, are fully understood.

Is this talk about a girl and her lover too grave? I believe not. There is not a relation of life in which we are not given to judging over-righteously.

There is nothing which offends humanity so much as the loneliness of its fellow human being. Though we lock our own doors, dry our own tears, smile our forced smiles, talk our lightest words when our fellows come near to probe the wounds we would cover away

from sight, we are still angry and offended because they will not tell us of their ailments, because the cry of mortality in its bitterest anguish is ever, "Leave me with my God" — its most earnest prayer to its eager fellows to be left alone — alone!

I think it must be greatly for this cause that we like the young; because, even though the pages of their book be blank, we are permitted to look over them; and it might be for the same reason, viz., because she was young, that George Geith, who had his secret confined and buried, was angry with Beryl for being what he called double-faced; for having her little by-play, too.

Practical man as he was, he never paused to ask himself what all this interest meant; what all this jealousy indicated; but talked on in his anger, while shallow Dick Elsenham read him through and through, and thought, with a half-compassionate contempt, that it would be rather good fun if the one business man tried to cut out the other. He knew, or thought he knew, George would have no chance with either father or daughter; though, to be sure, the Snareham connection put a new aspect on affairs. He might as well inquire a little further into that.

"I forget what relation you said you were to Sir Mark Geith," he said, as they rode still behind the others.

"Cousin," was the reply. "His father and mine were brothers."

"Then you are the next heir, I suppose?"

"Not I! There is a certain uncle; there are probable children; there are twenty other things between me and Snareham."

"Sir Mark is not married, though."

"Is he not? He and his wife, at any rate, were at my office not a month since," said George, almost rejoicingly. "You seem to take a wonderful interest in my relations, Mr. Elsenham," he added. "May I inquire if you know any of them?"

"I have met your cousin," answered the other, slowly. "I have met him where I think he was making his money spin. He plays infernally high, Mr. Geith."

"I suppose he has a right to do what he likes with his own," answered George.

"You do not appear particularly to care about him or his doings," remarked Mr. Elsenham.

"I care enough," was the reply; "but what would you have? Mark's way and mine lie in opposite directions. I cannot leave my path to follow his; and if I could, I am not aware that he would thank me for my pains. There is too wide a distinction between us for there to be much sympathy."

"Do you know much of him?" asked Mr. Elsenham.

"Had we been brothers I could scarcely at one time have known more," was the reply; "but there comes a day, as you are aware, when the rich and the poor must separate; and that day came long ago to us. He turned to his pleasure, I to my business; and every year as it passes by must separate us more and more."

"He was a good-hearted fellow, I think?" said Mr. Elsenham.

"Never a better breathed," answered George.

"Could he not have got you some appointment?" asked Mr. Elsenham.

"My dear sir," said George, with a look of the most profound compassion, "I do not want an appointment. I hang on my own hook, which I find a great deal stronger than any hook could be that was put up for me by another man."

"But the social standing?" suggested Mr. Elsenham.

"Social standing is success," answered the accountant, with a smile. "The incarnation of social success is riding before us. When I am rich enough to live in a place like Molozane Park, I shall have secured my standing likewise."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Miss Molozane, turning at the moment to speak to the pair, who had gradually been drawing nearer and nearer to their companions.

"About the poor; about the rich; about business; about the City," replied her cousin.

"Somewhat unusual subjects for you to discuss, are they not?" inquired Mr. Werne.

"I believe so," was the answer; "but getting into good company makes even fools wise for the time being; and Mr. Geith's conversation is of so practical a character, that I cannot choose but follow suit."

"Mr. Geith affects the City a little, I think I have understood," remarked Mr. Werne.

"Mr. Geith affects that which butters his bread," replied the accountant; "no more, no less. Though it is but a modicum which has been allowed me, I am still thankful not to have to eat my morsel dry."

"A sensible man to be a younger son, is he not, Mr. Werne?" demanded Mr. Elsenham, stroking his moustache. "If work were not such a confounded bore, he would almost persuade me to visit your El Dorado,

and see whether I, too, could not work a gold mine. It is a great thing to be earnest in anything, is it not? See how soon he has made a disciple of me."

Doubtfully Mr. Werne looked from the one man to the other before he said:

"I did not think it had been possible to convert Mr. Elsenham; and I congratulate you, Mr. Geith, on your success."

"Mr. Geith has the true missionary gift," remarked the younger man. "He knows how to stroke his cats without turning their hair the wrong way. Ah! if missionaries could only comprehend the way of the grain, what a number of pussies they might have purring after them!"

"Pussies have claws; so your simile is unfortunate, Dick," said Beryl.

"But, with judicious management, claws may be cut, Miss Beryl," suggested George, who took pleasure at the moment in following his companion's lead. "I must, however," he added, "disclaim Mr. Werne's implied compliment on my success, for I have achieved none. It merely so happened that Mr. Elsenham and I agreed on a few points, and went together into them."

"You and Dick agreed!" said Beryl, with a look of astonishment. "On what points, may I ask?"

"It is not good for little girls to know too much," answered her cousin; "and, besides, I want to inquire if we are to get home to-day; because, if we are, I think we had better alter our pace."

"My road lies to Withefell Hall," said Mr. Werne, "so I will not detain you longer;" and he forthwith shook hands with the ladies; and touching his hat to

the gentlemen, before raising it in final salute to the party, turned out of the sunshine to let them pass.

"A good riddance," observed Mr. Elsenham, who was striving with all his might to accommodate his horse's long trot to the awful little canter of Beryl's pony: "when Mr. Werne takes up his parable, I always long to send him a gown and bands."

"And when I hear you talking against him, I always long to ornament you with a pair of donkey's ears," said Beryl, pettishly.

"Mr. Geith was so charmed with his conversation," went on the young man; "he likes the poor so much, and thinks stories of their thrift, and providence, and necessity, so interesting and so instructive. The contrast, likewise, between Beryl a sinner and Beryl a saint was delicious. Why are you not a saint at home, cousin? You have no idea how much nicer we should all think you."

"I won't ride with you any more: I won't speak to you. I hate you, Dick," said Beryl, and she pulled up her pony short.

"Not you," answered her cousin, taking Trot's rein, and pulling him into a gallop; "you like me a precious sight better than you like Mr. Werne, when all is said and done."

"I do not; I can't bear you; and I never could; and you shan't pull my pony; and I will go home by myself."

"Would it go home by itself? and would it tell its papa that bad people teased it when it was a saint? and said it had two faces, one for a wicked world, and one for the immaculate owner of Molozone Park? and would it cry, and look pitiful? Will it dry its eyes on

Trot's mane? or shall I go after Mr. Werne to perform that operation for it?"

"I'll tell you what I shall do when I get home," said Beryl; "box your ears soundly."

"If it would improve your temper, box them now;" and Mr. Elsenham stooped down his head to receive the threatened punishment; but Beryl would not be appeased. She rode steadily on; both hands on her reins, looking straight ahead, till she suddenly turned to George and said:

"And you are just as bad as Dick. I thought better of you, Mr. Geith, I did."

"Now, it is your turn," remarked Mr. Elsenham, "give it to him well, Beryl; you don't know half he said against your idol."

"I said, Miss Beryl, that which I am prepared to stand to," observed George, who was never slow to take up the cudgels in his own behalf. "I never could see, and I never shall see, the good of talking so much about the poor: I was not particularly impressed with Mr. Werne — nor at all interested in his conversation; but, at the same time, I do not doubt his being a most excellent man; and am willing to admit that my want of appreciation may arise from a want of taste."

"He wearies me," said Matilda; "how Beryl can listen to him as she does, is a complete puzzle. For my part, I think he has completely destroyed the pleasure of our ride."

"You needn't have come back to ride with him," pouted Beryl.

"We will remember your hint next time," said Mr. Elsenham; but Beryl would not answer, nor take

any notice of him. She was looking with such a reproachful expression at the accountant that his heart melted towards her, and he felt bound to do battle in her behalf.

"If I recant, may I be forgiven, Miss Beryl?" he asked, in a low tone; and the result was what might have made many another swear black to be white; for she pulled her pony away from Dick, and riding round to the other side of Mr. Geith, took refuge between the hedge and Giraffe.

"I am very sorry to have offended you," he said.

"It was not your fault; you do not know Mr. Werne as I know him. When you do, you will think differently."

"I am ready to think differently now, if you desire it," remarked Mr. Geith; whereupon Mr. Elsenham laughed, and declared the accountant was as great a humbug as Mr. Werne — a compliment which that gentleman received with perfect temper.

"If I were only as good," he began.

"It would be well for you," finished Beryl, snappishly; and the short-lived truce was broken.

CHAPTER XXI.

Beryl Explains.

THERE was one comfort with Beryl Molozane, that, if she had little fits of ill humour, she did not stay long in them; and if she had periods of gravity and propriety, they were short in comparison with the long summer days which she could fill with laughter and glee.

Always after she had got up on a pedestal and

made a saint of herself, Beryl was sure to plunge into deeper depths than ever of fun and mockery. If she could once be got to laugh, all her solemnity vanished, and the house rang again with the sound of her mirth.

And a dull house it would have been without Beryl, as George Geith, sitting over his papers, acknowledged. She was to that place what the breath of life is to the body: the moving power, the animating cause, which kept the blood flowing through the veins, and smiles brightening the face. Her voice seemed never silent; her tongue never still. From the garden her gay tones came into the room where the accountant sate at work; lingering amongst the roses he found her when it grew too dark for him to see to do more.

"We are going to have a visitation on Monday, Mr. Geith," she said. "Granny is coming — Granny and her train."

"Her train?" repeated George, who was a little mystified.

"Yes; Granny, like other great ladies, cannot travel without one; and she would bring more people, only that papa won't have them here. As it is, she has her maid and Mr. Elsenham — old Mr. Elsenham I mean, her brother-in-law — and old Mr. Elsenham's man; and she comes in a great chariot, which puts up at the 'Stag,' at Wattisbridge, in company with her coachman and two footmen. She brought her butler down the last time, but I do not think she will try that again. He had a great deal to say to our cook about there being no servants' hall, and at last came to me, to observe he had not been accustomed to it."

"Did he tell you to what he had been accustomed?" asked her companion.

"No; I did not ask him, or probably he would; but I told him I was very sorry, and that if he had any suggestions to make as to what he would like, I should be glad to hear it. The beauty of it was," went on Beryl, "he knew I was making fun of him, though he could not find a word to say, except that 'No; he had no suggestion to make.' Then, said I, I do not see what I can do, for I am afraid grandmamma might not like me to have you in the drawing-room; but if you choose, I will ask her."

"What did he say then?" inquired Mr. Geith.

"He did not say anything to me," answered Beryl, "but he went straight off to Granny, and gave her notice; and she actually raised his wages and prayed him to stop; and he was graciously pleased to consent, only papa said he should not stop here; and so she had to send him back to London, and I wish they would all stay there."

"Why does she not come by the Eastern Counties line?" asked George, with a natural wonder that any one who could help it should put herself to so much trouble.

"For three reasons. One, she dislikes all railways; another, she cannot get to the Shoreditch station without crossing the City; and a third, she thinks she creates a sensation by coming down with as great a clatter as the Lord Mayor. The people about here think she is mad; that is all she gets in the way of public opinion out of her four horses."

"You don't mean to say that she travels with four horses?" said Mr. Geith.

"She would travel with eight if she could manage it," answered Beryl; "Granny is essentially — but you will see what she is for yourself when you see her. Meantime, I am so glad you are going to stay here to-morrow, so that we may have one day of peace before she comes."

George was glad too; and the intimacy between himself and the family at the Dower House had by this time become so close, that he never thought of uttering those courteous expressions of pleasure, regret, and so forth, which do good duty at the commencement of an acquaintance, but which seem such trumpery coin when acquaintance has ripened into something more, that friend never thinks of offering it to friend.

Accordingly, George Geith did not say he was glad — why, indeed, should he, when he knew that Beryl was perfectly well aware he was pleased to stop?

Thinking of his lonely Sundays in town, thinking of his lonely evenings in Fen Court, thinking of the days when he had not a soul to speak to whom he liked, nor a house at which he cared to visit where he was sure of a welcome, the accountant sometimes became almost unmanned, and wondered how he should be able to endure the old desolate life when he had to return to it in earnest once again.

It is not sorrow, nor toil, nor anxiety, nor difficulty, which tries the strength and endurance of a man like George Geith; but rather joy and happiness. All the world over, natures like his prove the truth of the old fable, in which it was not the strong north wind that beat down the traveller, but rather the beams of a genial sun.

Man bears that trouble to which he is born better than the glad sunshine for which he had no right to look; and it had come by this time to such a pass with George Geith, that, living in the light, he dared not look forth at the darkness into which, sooner or later, he knew he must plunge.

And those Sundays at the Dower House were so pleasant! when he could take his rest without any twinges of conscience about work neglected and hours wasted; when he could loiter over his dressing, listening to the insane co-cooing of the pigeons and the prating of the hens; when he did not consider it his duty to hurry over his breakfast, but could enjoy to the full that sunny morning room, which always in after years came back to his memory with open windows and floating muslin curtains; when the talk was so pleasant, the air so balmy, the place and the people so like home!

Then the leisurely walk across the fields to Wattis-bridge! the short, smooth grass on which the ladies' cool muslin dresses made a rustle as of the light wings of birds, the delicious country air, the pleasant country sights, the dancing of the squirrels in the wood, the loveliness of the wild flowers in the hedges, the blue sky, the green earth, and the calm stillness of the Christian Sabbath pervading all things, and underlying, like a soft key-note, the whole music of animated nature!

And what if the pleasure were sensational? Happy is the man, I think, who can take a sinless joy out of his senses! to whom Nature does not exhibit her landscapes, chant her melodies, unveil her loveliness, all in vain! whom the lights and sounds and flowers of the

summer thrill with a strange delight, and who can thank God for living and moving and having his being with the unquestioning simplicity of a child!

George Geith never felt so thankful about having resigned his profession as when he came out of church with Beryl Molozone. Whilst he was a curate, living within a sacred pale, fenced off to a certain extent from free contact with the laity, he never heard how the laity pull their clerical guides to pieces. With a sudden shock and horror it came upon him that perhaps in his day he had been derided and scoffed at too — his manner mimicked, his tone ridiculed, his mistakes pounced on, his sermons criticized. It was not healthy, he felt, for the congregation to be setting itself up in judgment; and yet, if the teachers were like the Wattisbridge clergy — muffs — what then?

He could not contradict the truth of what the Molozones said about rectors and curates alike; but, at the same time, it was not pleasant for a man who had been a clergyman to feel, that instead of himself and his brothers being as he once fondly imagined, teachers, they were rather set up as targets at which all the small witticisms, all the trifling jests of their hearers might be directed.

And had he dared to remind Beryl of the message these Wattisbridge curates brought, he knew she would at once have answered that it was at the messengers, not the message, she was laughing. But he did not dare. George, who in most respects had not been wont to feel cowardly, was now so anxious to keep on good terms with his host's family, that he often held his tongue when he knew he ought to have opened his lips, and when, but for some strange feeling which held

him back, he would have liked to speak to her about this mockery of all things (except Mr. Werne), holy and pure, which offended him.

For though he had thrown aside the gown, all *esprit de corps* had not departed also, and he often felt inclined to stand up and do battle for these men, against whom Dick Elsenham and Beryl Molozone were perpetually bending their bows and twanging their arrows.

Capping verses was nothing in comparison to the way this pair amused themselves, capping the peculiarities of the preacher. From the great family pew, which Mr. Molozone had not relinquished with the Park, the two took mental notes, which they compared when they came out of church; and George had heard Beryl, robed in a black silk cloak, with a red shawl hung on behind, delivering a sermon *à la* Wattisbridge to perfection. He knew when he was listening to her he ought to have gone out of the room, or offered some serious remonstrance, but he had only joined in Dick's laughter, and encouraged Beryl to further literary efforts; not a thing escaped her, not a movement, not a look, and to people who were inclined to laugh Wattisbridge Church offered temptations innumerable.

Often George caught himself thinking, "If I were there, how differently I would have the service performed;" and then he felt devoutly thankful he was not there, and that he never should have to preach again. For had his life depended on it, he knew he could not, after hearing Beryl's comments, be ever able to lift his mind above them, and he began to perceive

how fine a thing it is for clergymen, that, though they sometimes hear fault-finding, they never hear ridicule.

What made Mr. Geith more indignant against Beryl, if indignant be not far too strong a word, was, that he knew perfectly well if Mr. Werne were of the party, her tone would have been very different.

As it was, she chattered on — mocking, grimacing, ridiculing — till one might have thought life a puppet show, containing no definite aim in time, no hope for eternity.

George did not like it. He would have been better content to see Beryl down almost in the depths of despair, than to notice that nothing in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, seemed able to make any serious impression upon her. Could she be sorry for long? Could she grieve sincerely? Would it be possible for her to weep without the sunshine breaking through? Was there any earnestness about her? Had she really a heart? In very truth, did she possess a soul? Had women souls at all? he caught himself wondering, when Beryl woke him out of his brown study with —

“Well, Mr. Geith, what treason are you plotting now?”

“I was wondering whether it would be possible for any man to preach a sermon at which you would not care to laugh.”

“I think it would — will you try? We shall have plenty of leisure this afternoon, and we will listen to you as long as you like to talk. You shall take for your text, ‘Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh,’ if you choose, and none of us will be offended.”

"And then you will make fun of me to your heart's content."

"Oh! fie, Mr. Geith; do I make fun of my friends? Can I see anything in them of which to make fun? I suppose you are beginning to think, with Granny, that I can be serious about nothing — that I can feel no trouble — carry no burden."

"If I did think so, should I be wrong, Miss Beryl?" he inquired.

"*Et tu Brute!*" was all the answer he could get out of her; but the brown eyes proved more eloquent than her tongue, and looked reproaches at him — such reproaches, that George felt himself constrained to say:

"The truth is, I have never seen you grave but once, until yesterday; and yesterday—"

"You thought I was not grave in earnest," she quickly added, as he paused; "and there you were wrong. You imagine, because it is necessary to my existence to laugh at people's oddities, that I never feel for their woes. You think, because I have a quick sense of the ludicrous, that I have no eyes for grief. And there you do me an injustice. You often are unjust to me, Mr. Geith."

"Am I?" he said; "tell me how, and I will strive to think all you wish for the future."

"Why, you have got that stupid notion which so many people take up, that the same person cannot be sorry and merry. You fancy that, because I think the poor funny, I do not also think they are often in great distress. They may be humbugs — many of them are — and I see they are humbugs; but I know, at the same time, that no matter what they may be, they feel heat, and cold, and the want of blankets, and the

deariness of coals, and their inability to get meat, just as much as you or I. For this reason, I do my best to get them helped; but I reserve to myself the privilege of laughing, to prove I am not imposed on; that I see only their necessities as they are, and not their necessities as they present them for public inspection. Hunger and thirst, Mr. Geith, and the want of fire and clothing, are realities, concerning which I suppose even I may speak gravely if I please."

"Assuredly," answered her companion; "but there are other people besides the poor at whom you laugh; about whom you never speak a grave sentence."

"You are thinking of the unhappy Mr. Grey," she said, laughing. "I must make fun of Mr. Grey, and his light wavy hair; he is so terribly proper; so intensely decorous; one sentence lasts him as long as half a dozen would anybody else; one idea becomes in his hands a volume, sufficient for a whole day's slow conversation."

"But I believe he is an excellent young man," said Mr. Geith, rebukingly.

"Did you ever know any one who was a frightful bore; who could do nothing at a party but sit like a Pope on a hard chair, that was not an excellent young man? I never did, and I have had a large experience of curates: besides, what do I say against Mr. Grey? nothing, except that if he stopped with his text his sermons would be long enough; and that we are not to stare, because his 'mamma,' as he calls her, said he was shy, and that it was not good for him. All that does not prevent my thinking there is something very touching in the way his mother listens to him preaching; and I would not for any consideration

let her hear me laughing at him; or say to her that I do not think him a second St. Paul. Indeed, it is quite true that I never look at Mr. Grey without thinking 'He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.'"

This was the way Beryl spoiled every sentence she uttered. She never could sketch a grave face, without putting a mocking one behind it. Whether from habit, or from some mental distortion, it seemed impossible for her to disassociate even the most earnest things from the grotesque. The most serious subject had its laughable side; over graves the clown seemed dancing; behind tears there was an imp gibing and grinning.

There seemed nothing earnest in her, save that which is the common heritage of true-hearted women — love. She did not make fun of those she loved. Was that the reason she was grave with Mr. Werne?

George marvelled, and thought he would beat that cover, too.

"How does it happen," he asked, smiling, "that you never laugh at these things and people when you are with Mr. Werne?"

"How do you know I do not?" she quickly retorted.

"Because your cousin told me so," he answered.

"I shan't tell you — I can't tell you," she almost cried; but then, calming down in a moment, she went on: "Mr. Werne is different from most people. There is a gravity about him which infects even me; he is so earnest himself; he thinks life such a frightfully solemn affair that he makes me solemn in spite of myself. He compels me to feel good and miserable while

I am with him. I am not laughing now, Mr. Geith. I am only telling you the honest, sober truth."

And her face changed so while she was speaking that George could not doubt her word; could not think for a moment she was deluding herself, and misleading him; only he wondered more and more as to what it was Beryl really intended, as to what she really meant.

Two minutes after no one would have thought she meant anything; jesting with Mr. Elsenham; laughing at her sister; who could have told what with her was real — what assumed!

Which was the actual nature? that which skimmed through existence on the wings of mirth, or that which looked at life for an instant through tears?

Who may judge? Which of us, friends, may even guess at the true part of our neighbour's nature, when we are incompetent to lay our finger on the sterling metal in our own?

CHAPTER XXII.

Across the Fields.

THERE was no evening service at Wattisbridge, and as it did not suit the Molozanés to attend church in the afternoon, the three young ladies, their cousin, and Mr. Geith, walked over in the evening to Withefell Bottom, a little hamlet lying two miles on the other side of Withefell proper, where the vicar held forth on the saving nature of faith, and buried works out of sight, under a mausoleum of his own erection.

Beryl was kind enough to give an epitome of the probable sermon to the quartet after dinner; and Mr. Geith, who had in clerical days been a little "high,"

forbore to blame her, even in his heart, for her mimicry. Rather he enjoyed the ridicule; for Mr. Elsenham informed him, privately, that the vicar was a pet of the Withefell saint; and that not only the Withefell saint, but the proprietor of Withefell Hall affected the teaching of the clergyman who preached faith without works.

"Filthy rags of our own self-righteousness," said Beryl. "I always fancy bits of red cotton floating from gooseberry bushes when I hear that; but perhaps Mr. Geith may like the vicar. He is greatly run after by people who really think all they can do mere mites in the treasury; and also by those who would like to go to heaven without working at all: *vide* Mr. Finch. Eh, Dick?"

"Mr. Finch be hanged," said Mr. Elsenham in answer.

"You would have said something else if Mr. Geith had not been here," observed Louisa.

"It is all the same to me what he is," remarked her cousin.

"I were the architeck of my own fortunes, I were," said Beryl, coming down from her pulpit in a minute. "I never owed no man nothing in the way of gratitude. I wasn't like you, Mr. Elsenham: you was brought up in the lap of luxury; you had but to ring for this and t'other, and say, 'John, bring me this; John, fetch me that.' With me it were, 'Ned, you young beggar, where are you skulking?' or 'Ned, you lazy scoundrel, look sharp.' You loll in carriages, young man. You never rode in a wan, I'll be bound. I were glad, I were, to get a post as dog in a wan; I liked that better nor ever I did since I made my fortune, riding in a carriage like a swell. Well, well,

the ups and downs is wonderful; my old master's sons, the one is a counter-hopper, and the other a private in the 53rd. He went to the dogs, he did, and here am I, Edward Finch, Esquire, J.P., and owner of Withefell Hall. Life's strange, ain't it, Miss Beryl?"

"I wish you would not, Beryl," said Miss Molozone; and then Mr. Geith knew in a minute that Mr. Finch 'was the individual who had aspired to Miss Molozone's hand, and whom Beryl had said she should prefer to Dick Elsenham.

"And would Beryl have done so?" George asked himself. Would not the polish, slight though it might be, have been better to the girl than the frightful vulgarity of the other's address? With Mr. Finch he felt inclined to shout out, "Life's strange, ain't it?" and to wonder what there was in it real and true.

"Do you remember, Beryl, the Sunday you and I were turned out of Withefell Church?" asked Dick, with a malicious twinkle in his black eyes.

"Yes; and I remember with satisfaction the handful of hair I pulled out of your head before we were turned out," retorted Beryl, viciously.

"What had you been doing?" asked Mr. Geith.

"It was one Sunday, when we were little children," answered Beryl; "and as we were both horribly tired of being at the Park doing nothing, we stole out, and trotted off to Withefell Church, across the fields. Nobody there knew who we were, and when Dick and I got fighting over which should have the hymn-book, we were taken out; but not before we had made a frightful noise with rolling off the seat. I was carried out, I believe, and carried home. One thing I do recollect, that I scratched Dick's face; and I sometimes

wish I was young enough to scratch it again." And Beryl pulled a grimace at her cousin.

"You may make the most of your time," he said, "for you won't dare do that when Granny comes."

"I wish both you and your Granny were in the bottom of the sea," remarked Beryl; "why don't you keep her in London? we don't want her here."

"I am sure I don't," he answered. "Tell me some way of preventing her coming, and I will."

"Tell her we have small-pox — fever — cholera — what you choose. Like all good people, she is afraid of death. You will be so pleased with Granny, Mr. Geith; she is such a nice old lady, so much like her grandson."

"I declare she is not in the least like me," interrupted Mr. Elsenham.

"That is a pity, is it not, Mr. Geith? I have not one of her letters at hand, but I think I can repeat one of her epistles."

"Do you wish me to leave the room?" asked Miss Molozane.

"I am quite indifferent," answered Beryl, as she took up a piece of paper lying on the table, and began, after clearing her throat:

"MY DEAR NIECE, — It seems to me a long time since I heard from you, but I trust your silence does not proceed from any other cause than that of having been more agreeably occupied than in writing to an old woman. I shall trust to hear you, your dear papa, Beryl, and Louisa are well.

"I hope to see you, *if perfectly convenient* (D. V.), on Monday next. Thankful as I am and ought to be

to the Lord for his unspeakable mercies, I still feel I am getting old, and that an occasional change, and intercourse with young people is desirable. Will you therefore write, *by return*, saying whether you can receive me, Mr. Elsenham, Gibbs and Walton. The remainder of the servants can remain *as usual* at the 'Stag.'

"With kind remembrances to your father, Beryl, and Louisa, and much love for yourself,

"Your affectionate grandmother,

"M. L. ELSENHAM."

"L stands for Lucretia," explained Beryl, as she paused; "and I ought, perhaps, further to state that ——"

"Cannot you let her alone while she is in London?" interrupted Mr. Elsenham; "and go and put on your bonnet, and let us get off to church."

"You are so fond of church, Dick."

"I'd like it better if there were any pretty girls in the parish," retorted her cousin. Whereupon Miss Molozane rebuked them both; Mr. Elsenham for making the remark, and Beryl for provoking it. "The house is really like a bear-garden, with the two of you in it," observed the beauty.

"What is a bear-garden, Tilly?" asked Louisa gravely; but Miss Molozane declined giving any explanation; rather preferring to follow her cousin's advice, and prepare for their walk.

It was pleasant going to church across the fields in the evening, but George did not much care for the path as they came back. For one thing, the days

were beginning to draw in, and, for another, the sky was cloudy and dull, seeming to threaten rain.

Altogether there was a gloom over the landscape which depressed him, and the company of Messrs. Finch and Werne, who were so good as to walk back most of the way with the Dower House party, did not tend to raise his spirits. At every step he seemed to hear the chink of gold; every sentence reminded him that these men had made their money whilst he was still struggling. Houses, lands, wealth, position, he reflected, lay waiting for the acceptance of Mr. Molo-zane's daughters.

Bitterly he remembered that these people would be walking across the green Hertfordshire fields, and talking to the girls who had taught him what a happy home was like, in the (to him) dreary days to come, when he had done his work, and spoken his farewells, and returned to the old drudgery again.

He had no right to repine, certainly: he had been happy, he had enjoyed himself, his health was re-established, he had gained strength and fresh vigour through breathing the pure country air. Why, then, should he grieve? and George caught at the leaves of the trees, and plucked them off ruthlessly as he asked himself this question.

Why should he grieve? Ah, friends and fellow-travellers! how often are we asked this question? how often do we put it ourselves, and how seldom can we return any satisfactory answer to it? We have had our cake, we have eaten it. There has been no bitter in it; to the last crumb we have found it sweet. Why grieve, then? for we cannot eat and have.

But who does not grieve, who does not sorrow, for

that passing away which is, after all, the real misery of life? Friends, youth, beauty, fame, happiness, hours, where the sun is streaming on us, moments when in the moonlight we look at faces which we love, days which are full of such happiness that they seem scarcely to have been spent on earth; all these we touch, to feel they are but part of a procession which is ever moving from us, ever passing away. Why should we grieve? Good heavens! how could we do otherwise, when we know so well that after the sunshine comes gloom — after the day, night? Is it marvellous that, feeling the darkness creeping on, we should linger to the last in the light? that, feeling the waves of the cruel ocean we have breasted licking our feet, we should stretch out our hands after the groups that are walking away over the pleasant sands we shall never tread more?

Life's days are so gloomy when the summer is gone, its streets are so deserted when the gallant cavalcade is past, its ways are so stony when we have to tread them alone, that it is no wonder we grieve when the hour comes for parting, and the sad good-byes are spoken; no wonder, even though we have had all our right, our holiday, our cake, our milk.

George Geith had had his holiday, his happy sunny days of leisure; but behold! the holidays were well-nigh spent, and he was going back to resume his old low place in the school of life.

He was in bad spirits; he was dull; he was cross, if you will; and Beryl's cheerfulness vexed him, even though that cheerfulness was evinced in disagreeing with Mr. Werne, and laughing at his opinions.

For once before the Withefell saint Beryl was not

demure; and when she was running most counter to all his ideas, she would look over to Mr. Geith for approval, which, as she was annoying Mr. Werne for the sake of pleasing Mr. Geith, I think she deserved.

But George would not be appeased — not even when they got upon the question of the millennium, concerning the time of which Beryl expressed her belief that the Withefell vicar must have recently had some secret information from above.

"Because, how otherwise," said the young lady, "could he know for certain that it would be three years hence exactly?"

"I must say his arguments was very convincing," here put in Mr. Finch.

"You don't mean though, I suppose, that you believe there will be an end of all things at the end of three years?" said Beryl.

"I believe we are living in remarkable times," answered Mr. Finch, who pronounced the word as if it were "remarkyble;" "and that we cannot tell the day nor the hour, and that therefore, as Mr. Wilton says, we ought to put our houses in order."

"But Mr. Wilton says we do know the day and hour," interposed Louisa, "for he declared that, reading the signs of the times, the end of the world would come at the expiration of three years exactly."

"For which reason," added Beryl, a little flippantly, "if it were not for death, which really may come at any minute, we needn't be in such a hurry about our houses till nearer the time."

"Do you know," said Mr. Werne, "it appears to me the service has not benefited us much."

"I am sure it has not benefited me," answered

Miss Molozone; "for I was bored to death, and I have got a chill from the damp of the church. Mr. Finch, you really ought to build a new one; it is enough to kill any one sitting in it for a couple of hours."

"It lies in such a hollow," explained Mr. Werne.

"There are plenty of nice sites in the neighbourhood," observed Beryl.

"How does it happen you don't express no opinions about the sermon, sir?" asked Mr. Finch, turning benignly towards George.

"I am one of those happy individuals who have no opinions," replied the accountant.

"Oh! Mr. Geith, when you know you are a long way towards Rome," said Miss Molozone; while Louisa followed with —

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Werne; he goes far beyond the Wattisbridge people. He does not think the service there is performed properly at all."

"He wants a procession of priests, crosses, and candles; and he would feel happier if he could go to confession," added Beryl.

"Miss Beryl, as usual, is sacrificing her acquaintances to her love of amusement," answered Mr. Geith; whilst Mr. Werne turned towards him with a curious expression in his face — an expression, the meaning of which George did not understand till afterwards.

"But about the church," said Beryl, coming back to the point from which Mr. Finch had diverged. "Won't you build one? pray do. It would involve ever so much gaiety, and we want some excitement. Let me see; there would be the stone-laying, and the opening, and we might have a few bazaars; and then whoever

was married in it first, ought to invite everybody in the parish to the wedding."

"I suppose you would like a dance on the green at the consecration of the graveyard?" said Dick Elsenham.

"I should like a dance anywhere, under any circumstances," returned Beryl. "It is nearly as long a thing as I can remember, being at a party. Mr. Finch, I really think I should be better pleased if you were to give a ball, than if you were to build a church."

"Now it's curious, ain't it," remarked Mr. Finch to the company generally, "that I was just a-thinking of giving a hop."

"How enchanting!" exclaimed Beryl. "Do tell us all about it. Won't you have the dancing in the picture-gallery, and ——"

"I believe, Miss Molozane, I must say good evening," here interposed Mr. Werne; and shaking hands with all the party, he turned off across Molozane Park to his own residence.

Heaven knows what thoughts he carried with him by the way; but, judging from the look wherewith he regarded Beryl at parting, they could not have been pleasant.

"There is a mark against your name, old fellow," said Mr. Elsenham to Mr. Geith, looking after the retreating figure. "Werne will set you down as a Jesuit, and gravely remonstrate with my uncle on the danger of having you in the house."

"He is welcome," answered George. "I shall not be long in it now, at any rate;" and the pair walked on in silence, listening to Beryl teasing Mr. Finch to death about the ball, insisting he should fix a time,

and earnestly intreating him to come to the Dower House and talk over the preliminaries.

"Grandmamma will be with us to-morrow," said Beryl, demurely. "She will be so glad to see you."

"Thank you. I shall be very pleased to call on Mrs. Elsenham; very so, indeed; and if these gentlemen will come up and eat their mutton with me on Tuesday — dine in a plain way — I shall be better pleased still. I am very sorry, sir, not to have made your acquaintance earlier," he added, turning to George; "I should like to have a chat with you about the City. I'm from the City myself, sir, and I'm not ashamed to say so to nobody."

To which speech what answer could Mr. Geith make, but that he saw no occasion for anything but pride in the recollection?

"And you'll come too, won't you," continued Mr. Finch, turning towards Mr. Elsenham, which Dick assured him he would, stating for a reason after they parted from the owner of Withefell Hall, "that his wine was tip-top, although his grammar was the devil."

"Shall I tell you what your mutton will be, Mr. Geith?" asked Beryl. "Fish and mock turtle; ducks and green peas; lamb and mint sauce; *entrées* innumerable; puddings by the score; every vegetable you can mention; every fruit you can imagine. And his sister — oh! I must show you Miss Finch when we get home. And in the way of wines, he will give you what he calls 'clarick' and 'mussel;' and white and red; and heavy and light; and he will tell you that he himself does not care for anything but port; that there was a

time when he knew more about gin and 'Old Tom' than any genteel swallow; and that he ain't sure but a good glass of Hollands still beats Mounseer and Cavallero into fits."

"I do not intend, however, Miss Beryl, to drink Mr. Finch's wine, and make fun of him afterwards," remarked Mr. Geith, a little ill-humouredly.

"Don't, then," said Beryl; "but, as I do not care for either hock or claret, I shall make fun of him if I please. It's a good soul, though. I like Mr. Finch. He is a great favourite of mine."

"Heaven preserve me, then, from that distinction," murmured George, devoutly.

"But he is not one of my friends," she said, in a lower tone — a tone which came back to him often when the future became the present. "You have disapproved of my being grave, Mr. Geith; were you graciously pleased to approve of me this evening?"

"It is not for me to express an opinion," he replied.

"But it is, if you form one," she answered. "I am vexed now that I annoyed Mr. Werne. He is better than anybody else I know; but I was in a teasing mood, and I thought you did not care for me to be in earnest; and so I have fallen between two stools, as most people do when they try to please their neighbours."

"I hope you have not hurt yourself much," said her companion; and though Beryl could not help laughing, the tears came into her eyes whilst she laughed. Pity it was getting so dark that George could not see them!

But without seeing them, he began that night

taking himself to task. Sitting by the open window, inhaling the perfumes that came floating to him from the garden, alone, in the stillness, he commenced that personal cross-examination in which so few have the courage to persevere.

What did all this grief mean? What was this tearing at his heart? Why was he afraid to look forward? Why had he been so unutterably happy with these girls? He had never admired Beryl; he knew he did not now care for Matilda; whilst, as for Louey! Setting Matilda and Louey out of the question, however, thinking of a woman not as of a picture, but as a friend and companion, was not it Beryl he sorrowed to leave? — Beryl, who now occupied a shrine in his heart which had never been filled before by woman? For, though he had admired many; though he had all his life been a worshipper of beauty; though he had acknowledged many queens, fluttered around many a flame, he had never before felt anything like this — this which was eating into his soul, making existence insupportable, the future intolerable without her.

Through the long hours he sat thinking of this new gospel, which he had fancied was an old one with him, pondering over the mystery of this strange sensation which had stolen upon him so gently, so tranquilly, that it had become a part of himself before he dreamed of danger.

And now, when he saw the danger, what then? Did he resolve to win and to wear: did he ever, even in fancy, see Beryl his wife — hear her call him husband.

Never once; for there are some pains which bring with them partial numbness; and this agony of hope-

less love, of love which could but love and leave, left him no strength for aught save the thought, that he must go away; that at all hazards he must break the spell; and depart, carrying his wound with him.

He had never been able to realize Beryl married; even in his jealousy, even when he imagined she was lending a too favourable ear to Mr. Werne, he had never pictured her mistress of the Park; and now, when he came to understand that without her his life would be lonely for ever, he still could not fancy this girl a wife; no delusive picture of domestic happiness arose out of the darkness to mock him with false hopes.

And, supposing the choice to have been presented to him, of living on in his present paradise, or of taking his Eve out of it into the wide world beyond, I think George Geith would have chosen the former without an instant's hesitation. Fenced round by the hedges of Dower House; wandering amongst the roses in its old-fashioned garden; standing in the twilight on the terrace; he had felt secure both from sorrow and sin. The past lay outside, the future was forgotten. His long servitude, his seven years of work, his nights of toil, his days of anxiety, were all left behind when once the dear old house was reached, when once kindly voices greeted him, and soft hands touched his in welcome.

There was no need to think of money, no necessity for planning about ways and means; and to many a man it takes the gloss off love to have to be thinking about pounds, shillings, and pence; about sirloins of beef and legs of mutton, and that little account of the baker's, which he foresees the blessing of a wife

will entail upon him. Love-making is a pleasanter occupation than calculating "how much a year." Somehow, computing the expense of a woman's keep destroys the idea of her divinity. The business view of matrimony is not a pleasant one; but that romantic affection which in the full enjoyment of to-day, forgets that there must come a to-morrow, is a foretaste of heaven in which to-day is for ever, and to-morrow and the end never.

It is a mistake, I think, to imagine that a man's thoughts rush off straight from love to marriage, from ideality to reality. On the contrary, it appears to me natural that most men should ignore the mainland, with its labour, its care, its responsibility, so long as they can float over the ocean of love without trouble, without fear.

Moreover, if the acme of misery be the inability to hope, the acme of happiness is surely the absence of any wish to hope, of anything to wish for, save this, that the present might go on for ever without change.

And this was the state of beatitude in which George Geith had been living, and from which he awakened with a start to tell himself he must go. For what was he to Beryl, and what could Beryl Molozone be to him, save a memory of happiness? In the dull, dull days to come, when the snow was on the ground, when the frost was lying on the graves in Fen Court, when the black trees were dripping with blacker rain, and the pavements were sloppy, and the City wretched, he should still in recollection see Beryl standing among the roses, still hear her laugh ringing out happy and mirthful as of yore. To him she would never grow old; to him there would be no awful hereafter of grey

hair, of wrinkles, of old youngness, of sickness, feebleness, loss of youth. She would be his young love to him for ever; his to the day of his death, the laughing, singing, gleeful Beryl, of sweet seventeen. Other men might see their brides change to matrons, but for him there would be no change. She would be in his memory just the same, for ever and for ever.

Shall I go on telling how through the night he sat hugging his misery to him; indulging in melancholy, and finding sweetness in the cup, as though he were still a boy, and young enough to find imaginary luxury in a draught he had never tasted?

Shall I repeat the old, old story, of how first love — first, though it come as the finish to fifty fancies, hath still power to strike off the iron bands of time, and leave the soul free from the incubus of the years that have aged and worn the body. Would it not weary the reader to tell of the mist of tears through which this strong man beheld his ship going down among the breakers; to describe how, with head bent forward and arms folded on the window-sill, he made his discovery, and decided on his future course, whilst the gloom deepened and darkened, and wrapped him lovingly and gently in the clouds of night?

He was unmanned, and it was well that there were none who could see his face, for of all the troubles he had met and surmounted no trouble had ever come nigh unto him like this.

And yet, if he could have retraced his steps, would he? Ah! who that has loved would choose his ways to have been different? Who, after eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, would go back into Eden and leave the fruit untasted?

Amongst thorns and brambles his future way may lie, for his sake the ground may be cursed, and the earth yield her increase only in sorrow and with pain.

All this matters not, for his eyes have been opened, and it is something, even when wandering through all earth's darkest places, for him to remember that he has once caught a glimpse of heaven!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A Little Surprise.

How many good resolutions which night hears made, does not morning see broken? what does not wear a different aspect at noontide, from that which it did at midnight? What course decided on in the darkness do we not modify in the light? Are we the same men and the same women, I marvel, as the clock chimes the early morning hours, as we were when they were striking in the starlight stillness? Or are we like the lady of the fairy tale, who was a true wife one half of her time and a wandering wolf the other?

If night's good resolves could be carried into action after sunrise on the morrow, what a perfect world we should live in. If sluggards could but rise at the first call; if the weak could be but as strong; if the strong could be but as forbearing when day breaks as they meant to be a few hours before, would not our neighbours be almost too good? would not our own virtues dazzle our eyes? If ever the time arrives when that is done in the morning which was decided on over night, there will be no more stories to write of weakness, sorrow, repentance, remorse. The world will be

peopled with saints, and our bookshelves will be full of the lives thereof!

But as matters stand at present, the pie-crusts on which we expend so much labour in solitude are broken as soon as we come face to face with the world and its temptations. It was so with George Geith at any rate. The Beryl thought of in the midst of night's solemnity was a different being to the Beryl he met glancing amongst the flowers. She was something in the one case to part from, to beware of, as a snare and a sorrow; whilst in the other she was a girl to see as much of as possible; to be near, to talk to, to laugh with, as long as circumstances would permit.

The night had bid him depart; the sunshine begged him to stay. The still voice of the darkness had said, "Go; for each hour will but increase the misery of the inevitable parting;" but the summer wind murmured pleasanter words, as it fanned his cheek caressingly, and whispered, "Be happy whilst you may; your stay can do no harm to anybody but yourself."

What man would not have hearkened to the latter voice, and still basked on in the sunshine, more particularly when it seemed as if that morning, beyond all other mornings, Beryl had laid herself out to be agreeable and winning? She had her dogs with her on the lawn, where the poodle marched about gravely on his hind legs, and Royal offered first his right and then his left paw to George, with a sublime gravity which was irresistibly ludicrous.

From the lawn they walked up the elm avenue, and as they walked Beryl spoke of her father and sisters with a pretty gravity which was amazingly becoming to her.

Had not Mr. Geith noticed how ill papa was looking? Could he, would he, tell her how affairs were likely to turn out? Should they be able to keep the Park? To which latter question George made answer that he could not exactly tell her yet; but he inquired, "if it were to be sold, would Mr. Elsenham not purchase it, and so keep the property in the family?"

"He could not," Beryl replied; "he has not sixpence in the world of his own. Granny wanted to buy it, but papa would not sell. She then wished to rent it, but he preferred letting it to Mr. Werne."

"Would Mrs. Elsenham not purchase it for her grandson?" George inquired.

"No; and if she would, I am sure papa could never bear to see Dick master of the Park."

"Does he not like him?" asked her companion.

"Have you lived all this time with us, and not found that out?" she retorted. "Papa likes Dick almost as well as I do."

"But, seriously, you appear to me excellent friends."

"Do we?" she said; "that shows how much appearances may mislead."

"Do you mean then that you really are not friends? From what you said about Mr. Elsenham, I expected to find him an intolerable puppy. I confess I have been agreeably disappointed in him, and — —"

"And you think Tilly has chosen wisely," she added; "Well, Mr. Geith, if that be your opinion, it is not mine. You do not know Dick; you have never seen him yet in a fair light. I would not be in Dick's power, I would not be at the mercy of his generosity

for any earthly consideration. I would rather be indebted to Granny, and that is saying all I can say."

"If Mr. Molozone dislikes him, why does he permit the marriage to go on?"

"Now, Mr. Geith, do you think he could stop it if Granny and Tilly have set their hearts on its taking place? Besides, if Tilly likes him — and she does, I suppose — is not that all we need care for? Sometimes I can't hold my tongue about him to her, but afterwards I could bite it out for my pains."

"I should like to know why you dislike him so much, whilst you appear to get on so well together."

"It is very likely you will have your desire gratified if you go with him to the Hall to-morrow evening," she said, significantly, colouring a little as she spoke. "You have seen Dick at his very best, I assure you; and as for our getting on well, I have never yet met with anybody I could not talk to, except Granny; and even Louey is afraid of her. Louey will take to her writing as if she were earning ten thousand a year when Mrs. Elsenham comes."

"Do you think your sister would show me any of her writing?" he asked.

"To be sure she would, and be pleased at anybody taking an interest about the matter. I was looking at some of her things the other day, and I really do think they are very strange and wonderful, if I could understand them; but then I never was in the least clever. Now, I think Tilly, who is, might read Louey's poems to please her."

"Does Mr. Molozone not read them?"

"I think I told you we had lost one sister," she said; and the explanation was satisfactory. "I will

ask Louey for some of her poems." And straight away darted Beryl, followed at full flight by the dogs, who went growling and rolling over each other as they sped after her.

I am afraid George anathematized the manuscripts. It is very nice to be literary, and to talk on intellectual subjects may be very interesting and improving to those who care about intellect; but a walk, for all that, in the clear bright air of a summer morning, with a pretty, lively girl for a companion — a girl, moreover, with whom one is secretly in love — is nicer and more interesting still.

"Hang the poems!" thought the accountant, as he retraced his steps towards the house; and who may blame him?

"She is busy now," said Beryl, when she returned; "but she will look you some out after breakfast. She was so pleased about your wanting to see them, Mr. Geith! Somehow, I do not think we are right about Louey. It cannot be good for anybody to live a life apart, as she does; can it?"

"I think, if she were my sister, I should try to understand her a little," answered George.

"I wish I could; I wish I was clever!" sighed Beryl. "Now, if she would write prose, I should be able to read her things; but poetry — oh, if you could but imagine how it wearies me! If you do think her rhymes foolish, Mr. Geith, I am sure I need not ask you not to tell her so. She is hardly more than a child yet, though she does scribble on constantly."

And the tears sprang into Beryl's eyes as she spoke, though from what secret well they gushed George could not imagine. He only knew that this quick sensitive-

ness, this April nature, which was for ever changing, where there was sunshine one moment and shade the next, was one of Beryl's greatest charms.

He was beginning to understand how slight a line divides mirth from melancholy; how quickly tears may dim eyes that have been a moment before dancing with merriment. He was commencing to learn wherein this girl's power of attraction lay, viz., in a mental constitution which combined the keenest sense of the ridiculous, with the deepest sympathy for suffering; which, while it could see something ludicrous in the most ordinary — ay, and it might be, in the saddest circumstances of every-day life — had yet every chord attuned to echo the slightest breath of trouble, the faintest sigh of woe. If the finest wit be near akin to the deepest wisdom; so, the extremest gaiety is next-door neighbour to the truest sorrow; and those people who in themselves combine the two opposites of light-heartedness and sadness, charm us as the Irish melodies charm us, we scarcely know why, till we learn the secret of their peculiarity, which is, that plaintive minors are ever mingling with joyous majors; and that wherever a ringing octave comes, we may be sure a melancholy seventh will succeed thereto.

Thinking of this, thinking of what strange creatures women are, and of how much stranger some women are than others, George got fairly addled after breakfast among his accounts, and for once he was not sorry to see Louisa entering the library, and Louisa, moreover, without her cap.

He was so astonished at the change in her appearance, that for a minute he could not take his eyes off her.

"Do you not think it an improvement?" said the young lady, who, like Beryl, was not very easily disconcerted; though, like Beryl, she blushed a little as she spoke.

"I should think I do," he answered. "What can have induced you to disfigure yourself for so long a time?"

"My hair is only just growing again," she laughed, touching her short silky locks; "but I thought I should like to put on my best looks for Granny. Here are my manuscripts, Mr. Geith. Beryl said you would take the trouble of reading them;" and she straightway laid down the papers, and walking across the room, took up her old position on the library steps.

"Are you going to read them?" she asked, surveying him calmly from her vantage-ground.

"What! now?" he said.

"Certainly, now, this minute. I want to see what you think of them. I shall know better from your face than from any words you may speak."

It was a pleasant announcement certainly; but still George did not shrink from the task. He had voluntarily undertaken it; and if the manuscripts had to be read, and read moreover in the presence of the author, why, they should be read, that was all!

Besides, he really was curious to see what Louisa could find to say about things in general, and men and women in particular; and, accordingly, he opened the first folio which came to his hand, and which proved to be a tragedy in five acts, written out — as the productions of young authors always are written out — so legibly, with such loving neatness, that a printer might weep regretful tears over them.

For a while George read on steadily, then he began to lift his eyes from the page and look towards the author doubtfully. Meantime she sat perfectly still on the top of the steps, with her elbows resting on her knees, and her chin supported with both hands, staring at him with the most absorbed air of contemplation imaginable.

She would have been a proud girl at that minute, could she have known exactly what was passing through his mind. For it had suddenly dawned upon him, what some creatures in their teens can write before they die!

There was not much in the story, perhaps, and certainly nothing original in its treatment.

A father wrongfully executed; a son vowing himself to revenge; a woman faithful in love, yet strong in duty; the scene laid in the remotest Saxon ages; there was little in all this to interest a man like George Geith, and yet he was interested in the authoress and astonished at her talent.

He was sufficient of a critic to be able to shift out the corn from the chaff; and as he came upon such a passage as this:

"Revenge!

It is the fire which passion strikes from vice,"

he could not help marvelling where, in the name of wonder, the girl had gathered her ideas from.

On and still on he read:

"Go to; I feel not love: 'twas made for fools,
And is a worthless boon."

"It was *my* all; I gave it *thee*."

I am copying from the original manuscript, and I

pause here to ask, what George Geith asked himself; where do these thoughts come from? How can people whom the breath of passion has never touched, whom the flames of love have never scorched, imagine these things? how, when they have imagined them, can they put them into words? The genius of youth must, I think, be inspiration. It is easy to conceive how those who have passed through the furnace can tell of its heat; but it is as impossible to imagine how those who have never been tried in the fires of love, hate, or revenge, can write of their intensity, as to think how men who have never trodden the shores of a foreign land can describe its scenery.

Still George read on, read conscientiously, till he came to the last page; then he turned over the cover, and looked at Louisa.

"Well, Mr. Geith—?" He could see that the face of the Molozone Solomon was very pale as she said this interrogatively.

"I am astonished, Miss Louisa. I did not think you could have done it. I do not know where you can have got it."

And opening the manuscript again, he looked once more over this:

"Thou knowest not my nature:

The babbling brook, that ever pines and frets,
A breeze will stir; but the wide boundless ocean
Smiles at the feeble breeze, and can be tost
By Heaven's whirlwinds only: so my soul
Looked on life's troubles with a placid eye,
And bore them meekly, as what all endured,
And the gods ordered: but the loftier storm
Hath roused its slow-awakened energies,
And stern and steady are they."

"You think I can write, then?" She was by this time standing beside him.

"I am certain you can."

"And shall I make money?"

"That is a different matter; you may perhaps hereafter."

"Hereafter! when?"

"Fifteen, twenty years, perhaps," he said.

"When papa is dead; when the Park is gone; when I shall care for nothing; when it will not signify what comes or what goes;" and she fell on her knees beside the table, and rained such tears over her papers as George had never previously seen fall from a woman's eyes. Did he need to ask then whence she got part of her inspiration? Was he coming to understand at last that the life's book of the youngest may hold within its pages something of which the philosophy of the oldest dreams not?

Had this been the vision of the child beside him? Had she been thinking to redeem the past, to gild the future? Had she fallen into the usual error of imagining an ink-bottle would prove a gold mine, and quires of foolscap an El Dorado? Had she too built costly castles reaching to the skies? Had she talked to her own heart of the certainty of possibilities? In the solitude of soul into which she seemed to have retired, had she sketched the outline of a landscape which was never to be filled in?

And was reality horrible after the dream? Were those tears the sobs wherewith youth ever mourns the first touch of the cold water of experience?

Life is so icy, its practical lessons are so stern, that it is no marvel the young weep shudderingly at the

plunge, and look back through blinding tears regretfully towards the bank which they can never regain.

If George had spoken at random he had spoken truly, and truth always travels straight home, for which reason Louisa fell on her knees and wept, crying over her manuscripts such tears as unhappy mothers have sometimes cause to shed over their firstborn.

If there had been joy in these things there was trouble likewise; if, after her travail, she had rejoiced, so now, because of creations which she had brought into the world, she mourned; and George was vainly essaying some word of comfort, hopelessly racking his brain for sentences of consolation, when Beryl came in, and took the office of soother upon herself.

If George Geith had wanted anything more to make him in love with the girl, her conquest would have at that moment been complete. Had the fire needed fuel there would have been sufficient heaped on it at that moment to make its flames inextinguishable.

There was a something so indescribably tender about the way she took her sister to her; it was so pitiful to see the two clinging to one another; Beryl's sympathy was so true, her self-forgetfulness so real; the look in her brown eyes, as she lifted them to George's face, so vexed and troubled, that the accountant thought he had never seen so exquisite a home picture as that pair of young creatures seated together on the ground, with arms twining round waist and neck, with heads touching, with flowing dresses intermingling, and lying in masses of light drapery over the dark-green carpet.

"Don't cry, dear; don't cry," was all the eldest

could find to say at first; but as by degrees she gathered from George the cause of the outburst, she murmured better words of comfort, and drawing, by some feminine chemistry, every dark tint out of the future, presented it in such bright hues for Louisa's inspection, that, as the clouds will clear off a child's face at sight of a pleasant picture, her tears began to cease, and her sobs to grow less frequent.

But she never raised her head from Beryl's shoulder; she never took her arms away from clasping Beryl's neck; all the time she listened to the hopeful story her sister whispered, she nestled close to a heart which seemed strong enough and brave enough to bear its own sorrows and another's too.

"Now, I wonder," thought George, "what Miss Molozone would have done had she been here;" and he was just considering that the beauty might not have shown herself in such an amiable light, when the door opened, and a voice which he instantly recognised from Beryl's mimicry of it, exclaimed, in tones of the most unequivocal surprise and indignation:

"Well! I'm sure."

could find to say at first; but as by degrees she gathered from George the sense of the outbreak, she murmured better words of comfort, and drawing by some feminine chemistry, every dark tint out of the future, presented it in such bright hues for Louise's inspection, that as the clouds will clear off a child's face at sight of a pleasant picture, her tears began to cease, and her sobs to grow less frequent.

But she never raised her head from Betty's shoulder; she never took her arms away from clasping Betty's neck; all the time she listened to the hopeful story her sister whispered, she nestled close to a heart which seemed strong enough and brave enough to bear its

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own sorrows and sorrows of others. "What Miss Heloise would have done had she been here," and he was just considering that the beauty might not have shown herself in such an amiable light, when the door opened, and a voice which he instantly recognised from Betty's mimicry of it, exclaimed, in tones of the most unadmixt surprise and indignation:

"Well! I'm sure!"

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure!"

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure!"

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure!"

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure!"

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure!"

Trafford, F. G.

George Geith of Fen Court a novel

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